

# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Subject-verb agreement refers to using forms of characters and actions that match each other grammatically. Once you understand *verb conjugation*, you can see how these two pieces need to fall into place with one another. In English, subject-verb agreement usually comes down to whether the nouns and verbs are *singular* or *plural*.

Check out the “To Be Verbs” resource for more information on verb conjugation, including a visual aid for the connection between tense, number, and person.

## TYPES AND EXAMPLES

**Basics:** A singular subject must match a singular verb, just as a plural verb must match a plural subject. You may change either as long as the two correspond to one another; however, be sure that the meaning of the sentence remains accurate.

- ✗ Due to hard work, the student write a strong paper.
- ✓ Due to hard work, the student writes a strong paper.
- ✓ Due to hard work, students write strong papers.

- ✗ This particular tutor develop the resource.
- ✗ These tutors develop the resource.

While the sentence above becomes *grammatically* correct, now it is *factually* incorrect.

**And/Or:** Any two subjects combined with *and* serve as a joint, plural subject because multiple subjects act together. Any two *singular* subjects combined with *or* remain singular, since only one truly performs the action. Two *plural* subjects combined with *or* remain plural.

- ✗ The supervisor and her assistant works hard.
- ✓ The supervisor and her assistant work hard.
  
- ✗ Nikki or her boss review the paperwork.
- ✓ Nikki or her boss reviews the paperwork.
  
- ✗ The tutors or the coaches holds a meeting.
- ✓ The tutors or the coaches hold a meeting.

**Singular and Plural Together:** When a sentence using ‘or’ (or ‘nor’) contains both a plural subject and a singular subject, match the verb to the subject closest to it.

- ✗ The professor or the tutors gives the student feedback.
- ✓ The professor or the tutors give the student feedback.
- ✗ The tutors or the professor give the student feedback.
- ✓ The tutors or the professor gives the student feedback.

**Collective Nouns:** Some subjects refer to multiple people, which sounds plural, but remain as singular nouns themselves. These are nouns describing groups, such as ‘class,’ ‘family,’ ‘crowd,’ and ‘flock.’

- ✗ The swarm of bees pollinate the flowers.
- ✓ The swarm of bees pollinates the flowers.

Notice that even though the word ‘bees’ is plural, the actual subject of the verb is the singular, collective subject ‘swarm.’

**Words that Imply Number:** Some subjects, such as those that end in ‘one’ or ‘body’ (nobody, everyone, etc.) imply singular. Other words, such as ‘all,’ and ‘many,’ imply plural.

- ✗ Everybody want good grades.
- ✓ Everybody wants good grades.
- ✗ Is both of them going to the party?
- ✓ Are both of them going to the party?

Note that the same rules apply even if the verb comes before the subject, such as in a question.

**Special Cases:** Every so often, you will encounter a subject that appears plural in structure but really refers to a singular idea. A good example of this is ‘the news.’ It is somewhat similar to collective nouns.

- ✗ The measles are a dangerous disease.
- ✓ The measles is a dangerous disease.

## THE SUBJECT-VERB CONNECTION

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The previous sentences were simpler fixes because the verb immediately followed the subject.

**However, writers often make agreement errors when they place the subject and verb far apart.**

- ✗ Our tutors at the Writing Lab is interested in students’ concerns about their writing.
- ✓ Our tutors at the Writing Lab are interested in students’ concerns about their writing.
- ✗ The students of the university that worship God, after each completing his or her degree program, whether Law, Government, or Divinity, receives their diplomas.
- ✓ The students of the university that worship God, after each completing his or her degree program, whether Law, Government, or Divinity, receive their diplomas.

**While it is correct to simply fix the error, consider revising for clarity and concision as well. The same confusion that caused the error may also confuse the reader.** You have many options for revising, such as breaking the sentence into multiple sentences, moving phrases that interrupt the subject-verb connection to the beginning or end of the sentence, or changing the wording itself.

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