

SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT

Subject/verb agreement means that the subject and verb of a sentence must agree in number. When the subject is singular (one person, place, or thing), then the verb must be singular. When the subject is plural (more than one), the verb must also be plural. There are several different situations that make subject/verb agreement more difficult.

Problem spot #1: The verb forms of *be*, *have*, or *do*

FORMS OF THE VERB *BE*:

PRESENT TENSE	SINGULAR	PLURAL
<i>First person</i>	I am	we are
<i>Second person</i>	you are	you are
<i>Third person</i>	she, he, it is	they are

PAST TENSE	SINGULAR	PLURAL
<i>First person</i>	I was	we were
<i>Second person</i>	you were	you were
<i>Third person</i>	she, he, it was	they were

FORMS OF THE VERB *HAVE*, PRESENT TENSE:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
<i>First person</i>	I have	we have
<i>Second person</i>	you have	you have
<i>Third person</i>	she, he, it has	they have

(past tense form of *have* is always *had*)

FORMS OF THE VERB *DO*, PRESENT TENSE:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
<i>First person</i>	I do	we do
<i>Second person</i>	you do	you do
<i>Third person</i>	she, he, it does	they do

Problem spot #2: Words that come between the subject and the verb

When the subject and verb are not right next to each other, it is sometimes more difficult to identify them and make sure that they agree. Dependent clauses and prepositional phrases often come between the subject and verb of a sentence.

Example of a dependent clause between a subject and verb:

A person *who wishes to become President of the United States* must spend many hours on the campaign trail.

Example of a prepositional phrase between a subject and verb:

The president *of the Boy Scouts National Council* was unable to make it to this month's meeting.

Problem spot #3: The sentence has a compound subject

A **compound subject** is two or more subjects joined by the word *and*, *or*, or *nor*.

If the subjects are joined with *and*, they become a plural subject; therefore, the verb must also be plural.

Example: The mother and her son set the table each night for dinner.

If the subjects are separated with *or* or *nor*, the verb should agree with the subject that is closer to it.

Examples: Either the mother or her son sets the table for dinner.

The mother or her sons set the table for dinner.

Neither the mother nor her sons set the table for dinner.

Problem spot #4: The subject is an indefinite pronoun

Indefinite pronouns are the most frequent contributors to errors in subject/verb agreement. Most indefinite pronouns are singular and take singular verbs.

Becoming familiar with the most common indefinite pronouns can help writers avoid subject/verb agreement problems.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

ALWAYS SINGULAR:

another	everybody	no one
anybody	everyone	nothing
anyone	everything	one (of)
anything	much	somebody
each (of)	neither (of)	someone
either (of)	nobody	something

MAY BE SINGULAR OR PLURAL:

all
any
none
some

Examples:

One of your friends lives next door to my cousin.

Someone in this house needs to start cleaning his room.

Everyone in my family enjoys going swimming on Saturday afternoons.