

3 Subject-Verb Agreement

Seeing What You Know

Underline the verb that you think should be used in each of the following sentences. Then read the explanations below.

1. The two gray cats sitting by the trash can (belongs, belong) to a neighbor.
2. Which one of the bikes (is, are) Enrique going to buy?
3. Nobody in my family (carries, carry) a gun.
4. Chicago and Atlanta (has, have) the busiest airports in the United States.

Understanding the Answers

1. The two gray cats sitting by the trash can **belong** to a neighbor.
The subject, *cats*, is plural, so the verb must be plural as well.
2. Which one of the bikes **is** Enrique **going** to buy?
The subject, *Enrique*, and the verb, *is going*, are both singular.
3. Nobody in my family **carries** a gun.
The subject, *nobody*, is a singular indefinite pronoun, so it requires a singular verb.
4. Chicago and Atlanta **have** the busiest airports in the United States.
Chicago and Atlanta is a compound subject and requires a plural verb.

In a correctly written sentence, the subject and verb **agree** (match) **in number**. Singular subjects have singular verbs; plural subjects have plural verbs.

In a simple sentence of few words, it's not difficult to make the subject (*s*) and verb (*v*) agree:

s *v* (*plural*) *s* *v* (*singular*)

My parents work at two jobs. My grandmother takes care of the children.

However, not all sentences are this straightforward. This chapter will present four types of situations that can pose problems in subject-verb agreement: (1) subject and verb separated by a prepositional phrase, (2) verb coming before the subject, (3) indefinite pronoun subject, and (4) compound subjects.

1 SUBJECT AND VERB SEPARATED BY A PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

In many sentences, the subject is close to the verb, with the subject coming first. But in some sentences, the subject and verb do not appear side by side:

s *v*

Most stores in the mall are having sales this weekend.

Who or what is the sentence about? The answer is *stores* (not *mall*). What are the stores doing? They *are having* (sales). Since the subject (*stores*) is plural, the verb (*are having*) must be plural as well.

In the sentence above, a prepositional phrase, *in the mall*, separates the subject and the verb. (A **prepositional phrase** is a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun. *In, on, for, from, of, to, and by* are prepositions; a longer list of prepositions is on page 18.) Remember that the subject of the sentence is never part of a prepositional phrase. To find the subject, cross out prepositional phrases. Then make the verb agree with the subject—not with a word in the prepositional phrase.

Practice 1

Cross out the prepositional phrases in the sentences below. Then underline the subject of each sentence. Finally, double-underline the verb in parentheses that agrees with the subject.

1. The workers behind the counter (likes, like) to joke with their customers.
2. Two women on my bowling team always (scores, score) over 250.
3. The noise in the city streets sometimes (hurts, hurt) my ears.
4. A bag of nonfat potato chips (contains, contain) 440 calories.
5. The instructions for downloading software from the Internet (is, are) confusing for many people.

2 VERB COMING BEFORE THE SUBJECT

In most English sentences, the verb follows the subject. (I saw an eagle. The knife fell to the floor. A train crashed.) But in some sentences, the verb comes *before* the subject. These sentences often are questions, or they may begin with prepositional phrases or word groups like *there is* and *here are*. The verb must agree with the subject—even when the verb comes before the subject.

There **are** many starving **actors** in Hollywood. (*Plural verb, plural subject*)

Here **is** the computer **disk** for that project. (*Singular verb, singular subject*)

In that box **are** other **supplies**. (*Plural verb, plural subject*)

What **was** the **purpose** of that assignment? (*Singular verb, singular subject*)

If you are not sure of the subject in a sentence, find the verb and then ask “Who?” or “What?” In the first sentence above, for example, you would ask, “What are there in Hollywood?” The answer, “starving *actors*,” is the subject. For the second sentence, the question would be, “What is here?” The answer: “The computer *disk*.”

Practice 2

Cross out the prepositional phrases in the sentences below. Then underline the subject of each sentence. Finally, double-underline the verb in parentheses that agrees with the subject.

1. Where (is, are) the keys to the minivan?
2. Underneath that big rock (lives, live) hundreds of bugs.
3. There (was, were) seventeen people ahead of me in the bank line today.
4. Why (does, do) dogs always bark the loudest at 2 a.m.?
5. Inside each cardboard carton (is, are) a dozen boxes of Girl Scout cookies.

3 INDEFINITE PRONOUN SUBJECTS

The following **indefinite pronouns** always take singular verbs.

Singular Indefinite Pronouns

each	anyone	anybody	anything
either	everyone	everybody	everything
neither	someone	somebody	something
one	no one	nobody	nothing

Note the subject-verb relationships in the following sentences with indefinite pronouns:

One of those writing courses **is** still open. (*Singular subject, singular verb*)

Neither of my parents **has** called. (*Singular subject, singular verb*)

Somebody **was** reading my mail. (*Singular subject, singular verb*)

Everyone **loves** to get something for nothing. (*Singular subject, singular verb*)

Practice 3

Underline the subject of each sentence. Then double-underline the verb in parentheses that agrees with the subject.

1. Everything on those shelves (is, are) on sale at 50 percent off.
2. Neither of the lights in the basement (works, work).
3. No one in my family (is, are) right-handed.
4. Each of those kittens (deserves, deserve) a good home.
5. Everybody in my apartment building (knows, know) when someone is having a party.

4 COMPOUND SUBJECTS

A **compound subject**—usually two or more subjects joined by *and*—requires a plural verb.

Rent and car insurance **were** my biggest expenses each month.

There **are** canoes and sailboats for rent.

Do the TV and DVD player **provide** stereo sound?

Practice 4

Underline the compound subject of each sentence. Then double-underline the verb in parentheses that agrees with the compound subject.

1. Our cats and dog (stays, stay) at a neighbor's house when we go on vacation.
2. (Is, Are) all the CDs and DVDs in the store included in the sale?
3. Staples and Scotch tape (holds, hold) all the old record album covers together.
4. The scratches and dents on our new car (was, were) definitely our son's fault.
5. My accounting course and my statistics course (requires, require) long written reports.

Note Additional information about subject-verb agreement appears on pages 208–209.

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____
 Score: (Number right) _____ × 10 = _____ %

■ Subject-Verb Agreement: Test 1

In each sentence, fill in the correct form of the missing verb.

Note To help you learn subject-verb agreement, explanations are given for five of the sentences.

likes

1. Nobody _____ to be laughed at.

like

Nobody is an indefinite pronoun that always requires a singular verb.

smells

2. Everything in our attic _____ of mothballs.

smell

is

3. Black and white _____ the only colors Jermaine wears.

are

Black and white is a compound subject requiring a plural verb.

makes

4. Bright yellow daisies and blue morning glories _____ the tiny yard beautiful.

make

gives

5. The lamps on either side of the couch _____ very little light.

give

Lamps, the subject, is a plural noun and so needs a plural verb. On either side and of the couch are prepositional phrases. The subject is never in—or affected by—a prepositional phrase.

plans

6. All the suits in my closet except one _____ to get cleaned.

plan

is

7. There _____ no doubt that the witnesses are telling the truth.

are

When a sentence begins with here or there, the subject will come after the verb. Doubt, the subject, is singular and requires a singular verb.

is

8. Here _____ the names of three doctors you can call.

are

is

9. When _____ the deadline for dropping a course?

are

In a question, the subject often follows the verb. The subject, deadline, is singular, so it requires a singular verb form.

Does

10. _____ your aunt and uncle know that you wrote an essay about them?

Do

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____
Score: (Number right) _____ × 10 = _____ %

■ Subject-Verb Agreement: Test 2

In each sentence, fill in the correct form of the missing verb.

stands
stand

1. Across the street _____ the oldest house in town.

belongs
belong

2. The leather jacket beside the books _____ to our teacher.

is
are

3. Rags and spray cleaner _____ needed to wash the windows.

annoys
annoy

4. Junk e-mail and chain letters _____ many Internet users.

Is
Are

5. _____ those parking spaces in front of the administration building reserved for the faculty?

attracts
attract

6. The flowers in my neighbor's garden _____ many butterflies.

is
are

7. Magnolia trees and Spanish moss _____ common in many parts of the South.

was
were

8. Running down the back alley toward the fire _____ several police officers.

seems
seem

9. Tom and Caroline's marriage _____ like a happy one.

is
are

10. Every one of my roommates _____ depressed over getting poor grades on the psychology exam.

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____
 Score: (Number right) _____ $\times 10 =$ _____ %

■ Subject-Verb Agreement: Test 3

Each of the following passages contains **two** mistakes in subject-verb agreement. Find and underline the two verbs that do not agree with their subjects. Then write the correct form of each verb in the spaces provided.

Note To help you learn subject-verb agreement, explanations are given for the first mistake in each passage.

1. Construction of the apartment buildings have been going on for months. The noise from the bulldozers, cranes, and backhoes are deafening. Everyone in the neighborhood wants it to end.
 - a. _____ *Of the apartment buildings is a prepositional phrase. The subject of the first sentence, **construction**, is singular.*
 - b. _____
2. It is not true that the skin of snakes are slimy. Also, warts are not caused by touching a toad. Why does reptiles and amphibians have so many false stories told about them?
 - a. _____ *The subject of the first sentence is **skin**; of snakes is a prepositional phrase.*
 - b. _____
3. Nothing about my restaurant job bother me as much as the way the chef makes fun of the mentally challenged man who runs the dishwasher. The chef simply doesn't realize that people with a disability also has feelings.
 - a. _____ *The subject **nothing** is an indefinite pronoun. It takes a singular verb.*
 - b. _____
4. The new employee's quick wit and willingness to work hard pleases her boss very much. She is the kind of person whom everyone in the office enjoy having as a coworker.
 - a. _____ *The compound subject, **wit and willingness**, requires a plural verb.*
 - b. _____
5. "Having a successful marriage is not easy," admitted Neal. "There has been many times I've thought about leaving. However, my commitment to my marriage and my love for my family stops me. Later, I'm always glad that I stayed."
 - a. _____ *The subject of the second sentence, **times**, is plural.*
 - b. _____

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____
Score: (Number right) _____ $\times 10 =$ _____ %

■ Subject-Verb Agreement: Test 4

Each of the following passages contains **two** mistakes in subject-verb agreement. Find and underline the two verbs that do not agree with their subjects. Then write the correct form of each verb in the spaces provided.

1. The students and the teacher is having a disagreement about the upcoming test. The teacher says it is scheduled for Friday, but every one of the students believe she announced it for the following Monday.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
2. There are a lot of young women in my office. It seems as if everyone have had a baby recently. All the baby presents costs me a fortune.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
3. High on the closet shelf is several brightly wrapped packages—the little girl’s birthday presents. The girl knows that they are there. Every day, she and her sister tries for hours to guess what might be inside those mysterious boxes.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
4. Cara invited her two sisters to the party, but neither of them are coming. Each sister is busy, one with a work deadline and the other with a school reunion. “Why,” Cara complained, “does the only important events in their lives this month have to happen at the same time?”
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
5. The computers in the office gives me heartburn. Everybody, it seems, have success with them except me. I’m going to take a computer course so I can show them who is boss.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____
 Score: (Number right) _____ × 10 = _____ %

■ Subject-Verb Agreement: Test 5

Each sentence in the following passage contains one mistake in subject-verb agreement. Find and underline the ten verbs that do not agree with their subjects. Then write the correct form of each verb on the lines below.

Note To help you learn subject-verb agreement, explanations are given for five of the mistakes.

¹I used to think there was few tasks more difficult than picking out birthday presents for my friends. ²Since my husband and I don't have much extra money, big luxuries are out, and the household goods on sale at K-Mart is not the kinds of presents they'd enjoy getting. ³But birthday shopping has become simpler since I decided that what everybody really like is toys. ⁴Forget the big, expensive department stores; children's catalogs and novelty shops is where I do my buying. ⁵My favorites of the whole toy collection has been the rubber stamp sets. ⁶One of them contain funny pictures of parts of faces: eyes, ears, noses, and so on. ⁷With it, anyone become a cartoonist, creating silly faces to decorate all kinds of things. ⁸To another friend was sent flying saucers that soar into the air when you pull their strings. ⁹There is now saucers all over the roof of her apartment building, and she tells me her neighbors and the building superintendent have no idea where the saucers came from. ¹⁰I'm actually looking forward to shopping for another friend's birthday—I think a couple of trick hand buzzers and a glow-in-the-dark yo-yo is what we'll buy next.

1. _____ The subject is *tasks*. *Was*, a singular verb, needs to be replaced by a plural verb.
2. _____
3. _____ *Everybody*, an indefinite pronoun, is singular and thus needs a singular verb.
4. _____
5. _____ The subject is *favorites*. *Of the whole collection* is a prepositional phrase that does not affect the number of the subject.
6. _____
7. _____ *Anyone* is an indefinite pronoun and needs a singular verb.
8. _____
9. _____ When a sentence begins with *here* or *there*, the subject will follow the verb. The subject is *saucers*, which requires a plural verb.
10. _____

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____
Score: (Number right) _____ × 10 = _____ %

■ Subject-Verb Agreement: Test 6

Each sentence in the following passage contains one mistake in subject-verb agreement. Find and underline the ten verbs that do not agree with their subjects. Then write the correct form of each verb on the lines below.

¹Millions of tons of trash floats in our oceans. ²There is all kinds of items, including fishing nets and bottles. ³Currents in the ocean carries this debris so that it collects in big areas known as garbage patches. ⁴These areas of garbage has been increasing in size since plastic came to be commonly used, about sixty years ago. ⁵Anything made of plastic materials are very durable and buoyant, so it will float in the ocean for many years. ⁶The biggest one of the garbage patches lie about halfway between Hawaii and San Francisco; it is about the size of Texas and is at least 100 feet deep. ⁷Why is these garbage patches such a problem? ⁸For one thing, birds and fish mistakes the plastic for food and are dying. ⁹In addition, if they eat these fish, animals and people risks harm from the plastic or from poisonous substances in the garbage. ¹⁰Until everyone finally stop making so much trash, there is no point in trying to clean up the garbage patches.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____