



Subject-verb Agreement

The subject and the verb of a sentence have a special relationship. Unfortunately, as in most relationships, the subject and verb may disagree at times and then the entire sentence can sound awkward. Identifying this error can be tricky, but there are a few methods that can help you fix that disagreement.

Subjects are in *italics* and verbs are in **bold**.

- 1) Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a word that comes between. Note that phrases beginning with prepositions like ‘as well as,’ ‘in addition to,’ ‘accompanied by,’ ‘together with,’ and ‘along with’ do not make a singular subject plural:

Incorrect: High *levels* of air pollution causes damage to the respiratory tract.

Correct: High *levels* of air pollution cause damage to the respiratory tract.

Incorrect: The *governor*, as well as his press secretary, were shot.

Correct: The *governor*, as well as his press secretary, was shot.

- 2) Treat most subjects joined with ‘and’ as plural unless the parts of the subject form a single unit:

Incorrect: Jill’s natural *ability* and her *desire* to help others has led to a career in the ministry.

Correct: Jill’s natural *ability* and her *desire* to help others have led to a career in the ministry.

Incorrect: *Strawberries and cream* were a last-minute addition to the menu.

Correct: *Strawberries and cream* was a last-minute addition to the menu.

- 3) With subjects connected by ‘or’ or ‘nor’ make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb:

Incorrect: If a *relative* or *neighbor* are abusing a child, notify the police.

Correct: If a *relative* or *neighbor* is abusing a child, notify the police.

- 4) Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular:

Incorrect: *Everybody* who signed up for the ski trip were taking lessons.

Correct: *Everybody* who signed up for the ski trip was taking lessons.

- 5) Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural:

Incorrect: The *board* of trustees meet in Denver on the first Tuesday of each month.

Correct: The *board* of trustees meets in Denver on the first Tuesday of each month.

The Maytum Learning Commons

writing • speech • technology • research • tutoring • study skills • academic planning • disability services
sites.allegheny.edu/learningcommons

6) Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb:

Incorrect: In the bay window is a large ficus *tree* and several hanging *ferns*.

Correct: In the bay window are a large ficus *tree* and several hanging *ferns*.

7) Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a subject complement:

Incorrect: A *tent* and a sleeping *bag* is the required equipment.

Correct: A *tent* and a sleeping *bag* are the required equipment.

8) 'Who,' 'which,' and 'that' take verbs that agree with their antecedents:

Incorrect: Our *ability* to use language is one of the things that sets us apart from animals.

Correct: Our *ability* to use language is one of the things that set us apart from animals.

9) Words such as 'athletics,' 'economics,' 'mathematics,' 'physics,' 'statistics,' 'measles,' and 'news' are usually singular, despite their plural form:

Incorrect: *Statistics* are among the most difficult courses in our program.

Correct: *Statistics* is among the most difficult courses in our program.

10) Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as words, and gerund phrases (-ing verb form followed by any objects complements or modifiers) are singular:

Incorrect: *Lost Cities* describe the discoveries of many ancient civilizations.

Correct: *Lost Cities* describes the discoveries of many ancient civilizations.

Incorrect: *Controlled substances* are a euphemism for illegal drugs.

Correct: *Controlled substances* is a euphemism for illegal drugs.

Incorrect: *Encountering* busy signals are troublesome to our clients, so we have hired two new switchboard operators.

Correct: *Encountering* busy signals is troublesome to our clients, so we have hired two new switchboard operators.