

Subject-Verb Agreement

A “grammar help worksheet” by Abbie Potter Henry

(Subjects are in bold typeface and verbs are underlined)

Subject-Verb Agreement means that subjects and verbs must always agree in number. Not only does a verb change its form to tell time, but it also can change its form to indicate how many subjects it has.

For example, take the verb “run.” When we are in the present tense, the verb “run” changes form to show that its subject is singular when its subject is anything but “I” or “you.”

Study the following chart.

	<u>Singular Subjects</u>	<u>Plural Subjects</u>
<u>First Person:</u>	I <u>run</u> .	We <u>run</u> .
<u>Second Person:</u>	You <u>run</u> .	You all <u>run</u> .
<u>Third Person:</u>	He <u>runs</u> . She <u>runs</u> . The boy <u>runs</u> .	They <u>run</u> .

Did you notice that in the third person singular, an “s” was added to the verb form? The fact is that all present tense verbs have an “s” added to them when the subject is third person singular.

Think for a moment about the verbs, walk, run, eat, sleep, try, study, and work. Now, give these verbs the subject “I.” **I** walk; **I** run; **I** eat; the pronoun “**I**” is the only word that can be a first person subject; likewise, the word “**you**” is the only word that can be a second person subject. The present tense verb for you remains the same as for “I.” You walk; you run; you eat.

However, when we change the subject “**I**” or “**you**” to “**he**,” or “the **cat**,” we must add an “s.” to each verb. The **cat** walks; the **cat** runs; the **cat** eats; etc. This is a simple rule that most of us automatically use without even thinking, and it applies to every singular third person verb in the entire English language, from walk/walks to run/runs to laugh/laughs to cry/cries. This also includes the helping verbs do/does, is/are, and has/have.

While we are not likely to write or speak the following sentences: **I** walks; **They** walks; **The cat** walk, if we do, we create a **Subject-Verb Agreement Error**.

Subject-Verb Agreement Errors are very serious and signal that the writer does not have mastery over the English Language. Thus, it is important that writers understand the following thirteen different situations that might cause subject-verb agreement errors. Because of these special situations, there are thirteen corresponding rules to ensure that our subjects and verbs always agree in number.

Once you have gone over these 13 rules and written your own example sentences, you can practice your skill on the website *Chompchomp.com*. Once on the website, go to “Exercises” and find “Subject-Verb Agreement.” Have fun and keep writing.

13 Rules of Subject-Verb Agreement

1. Two or more subjects joined by “and” are considered plural and require a verb form without an “s.”

- a. Example: **Jan, John, and Bob** walk to the store.

Bob and his **brothers** walk to the store.

Create your own examples here:

2. If a subject is modified by the words “each” or “every” that subject is singular and will take a verb form that ends in “s.”

- a. Example: Each **boy** and **girl** walks to the store.

Create your own examples here:

3. If plural subjects are joined by “or,” “nor,” or “but,” the verb must only agree with the subject that is closest to it.

- a. Example: Either **Bob** or his **brother** walks to the store.

Neither **Bob** nor his **brothers** walk to the store.

Not **Bob** but his **brothers** walk to the store

Not Bob but his **brother** walks to the store

Create your own examples here:

4. Indefinite pronouns* are usually singular and take a verb form that ends in “s.” (You will find a list of indefinite pronouns at the end of this handout.)

- a. Example: **Everyone** walks to the store.

- b. **Everything** comes back eventually.

Create your own examples here:

*See page 5 for a complete list of these words.

5. The subject of a verb is never in a prepositional* or verbal phrase. Therefore, you must isolate the phrase and find the proper subject.

a. Example: The mother **duck** (with all of her little ducklings) walks to the store.

The mother **duck** (including all her ducklings) walks to the store.

Create your own examples here:

6. Some indefinite pronouns and nouns will be singular or plural depending on the object of the prepositional phrase. These words are always about number or amount such as: *all, half, some, none, most, part, etc.*

a. Example: **Some** (of the students) are gone.

Some (of the cake) is gone.

The mother **duck** and **all** (of her ducklings) walk to the store.

Create your own examples here:

7. When a collective noun, such as *family, group, committee, or class*, is the subject, the verb will end in “s.”

a. Example: My **family** with all my crazy cousins always walks to the store.

Create your own examples here:

8. A few nouns, such as *economics, mumps, measles, or news* end in “s” but are considered singular. You can tell these “s” words are singular because if you take the “s” away, you don’t have a noun. For example, *economic* and *new* are adjectives that describe a noun. *Mump* and *measle* just don’t make any sense.

a. Example: **Economics** is her favorite subject.

Create your own examples here:

*See page 5 for a list of common prepositions.

9. When the subject is a unit of measurement of time, distance, money, weight, etc. The unit is considered singular, and the verb will end in “s.”
- Example: **Ten pounds** of chocolate is too much to eat at once.
 - Thirteen feet** of kite string tangles very easily.

Create your own examples here:

10. In a question or in a sentence that begins with *there* or *here*, the verb will often come before the subject.
- Example: Where is my **sweater**?
There are my **sweaters**.

Create your own examples here:

11. The verb must agree only with the subject.
- Example: The biggest **problem** we face is all the squirrels that have rabies around here.

Create your own examples here:

12. Gerunds (“ing” words) can be subjects and follow all the same rules above.
- Example: **Running** with ducks is my favorite sport.
Running to the store and **flying** through the air are my favorite sports.

Create your own examples here:

13. When using *who*, *that* or *which*, you must look to the noun these relative pronouns are referring to in order to determine whether the subject is singular and will have a verb ending in “s” or is plural and have a verb without an “s.”

- Example: The **girls who eat** cake are happy.
The **girl who eats** cake is happy.

Create your own examples here:

Words that can cause confusion with Subject Verb Agreement

Indefinite pronouns that always take a singular verb form:

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

Peculiar Pronouns and Nouns that can be singular or plural depending upon context:
(Notice these all refer to amount.)

all	most	some	none	half	part
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Common Prepositions

(Remember, a subject never shows up in a prepositional phrase, but these phrases often come between a subject and its verb.)

about	above	across	after	among	around	as
at	because of	before	Behind	below	beneath	beside
between	by	during	except	for	from	in
in spite of	into	like	near	of	on	onto
over	past	through	till	to	toward	under
until	up	upon	with	up	without	

Pronoun agreement

Pronouns that take the place of a noun must be either plural or singular just like the noun they represent.

Example Everyone has his or her own way of thinking. Correct
Everyone has their own way of thinking. Incorrect

All the rules of pronoun agreement are based on the rules of subject-verb agreement.

Pronouns must also agree in person.

Example: I love the beach because I can get a good tan. Correct
I love the beach because you can get a good tan. Incorrect