

022 Grammar 04 - Subject-Verb Agreement

When teachers and English professors talk about “subject-verb agreement” in writing, they essentially mean two things: 1.) that single actors in a sentence—one person, one idea, one thing—need to be paired up with the singular forms of verbs, and 2.) plural actors—multiple people, ideas, or things—need to be paired with the plural forms of verbs.



Here are some examples of simple, single actor (single-subject) sentences. Notice how these are paired with the *singular* form of the verb in the sentence. The actors are bolded below; the singular verbs are underlined.

My daughter is four years old.

Reisling is a sweet white wine popular in Germany.

My car breaks down whenever it is cold.

Senator Blakely often finds passing his bills on middle-class tax cuts more difficult than he expected.

It rained all last week.

The crooked city councilman was sentenced to eight months in prison for taking bribes in office.

The forklift runs on a mixture of gasoline and propane.

If we change the *numbers* of the subjects in these sentences, however—making them *plural subjects*—we must also often change the form of the verb in them to reflect that there is more than one actor.

My daughters are four and six years old.

Reislings are sweet white wines popular in Germany.

Our cars break down whenever it is cold.

Senators Blakely and James often find passing their bills on middle-class tax cuts more difficult than they expected.

The crooked city councilman and his co-conspirators were sentenced to eight months in prison for the bribery scandal.

The forklifts run on a mixture of gasoline and propane.

Here are the same sentences written **incorrectly** with singular verbs instead of the correct plural ones: can you tell the difference?

My daughters is four and six years old.

Reislings is sweet white wines popular in Germany.

The cars breaks down whenever it is cold.

Senators Blakely and James often finds passing their bills on middle-class tax cuts more difficult than they expected.

The crooked city councilman and his co-conspirators was sentenced to eight months in prison for the bribery scandal.

The forklifts runs on a mixture of gasoline and propane.

Exercise: Identifying Singular and Plural Subjects

Identify the subjects in the sentences below as *singular* (S) or *plural* (P). Look at the *verb* in the sentence for some help.

1. Walter didn't get up in time to make it to the bus, so he was late to school. S / P

2. Marie's teachers love that she made a diorama illustrating cell division for the school science fair. S / P
3. The blues is a genre of music with its origins in the American south. S / P
4. My brother's car got a flat tire on the way to the concert. S / P
5. The computers in the lab across the hall from my professor's office are overheating on a regular basis. S / P
6. The churches on the block near my house need new roofs after the storm last week. S / P
7. The leaflets for the new club were pinned to every car's windshield. S / P
8. Texting in class is rude. S / P
9. My family treats me wonderfully most of the time. S / P
10. Katherine's scissors are getting dull because she uses them all the time. S / P

Compound Subjects

These are subjects that consist of more than one singular actor, usually connected to each other with some kind of conjunction. The verb forms necessary for these subjects often depend on how the subjects are connected to one another.

Here are some examples:

Marty and his friend Doc run a time-machine servicing business in Hilldale, California.

John and Cassie were married in November.

English 101 and 102 are required courses at most American universities.

My iPhone or iPod is in my jacket pocket.

Neither ibuprofen nor acetaminaphen gives me relief for my migraine headaches.

My brother or his partners post something to their company website every day.

The trainer or his trainees run hills in the evenings.

Some basic guidelines for compound subjects:

[Single X] **and** [Single Y] = plural verb

John and Sam travel together in the summer.

Jasmine and Cordelia live together in Smith Hall.

Running and kayaking are my wife's favorite outdoor activities.

The dog and the cat keep getting sick.

Baked ziti and roasted Italian sausage make a good meal.

[Single X] **or/nor** [Single Y] = singular verb

John or Sam travels to India each March to work for their dad's manufacturing business.

Jasmine or Cordelia cooks dinner for us every night.

Running or kayaking is my wife's preferred Sunday activity.

Neither the dog nor the cat tolerates riding in the car well; one of the two always gets sick.

Baked ziti or roasted Italian sausage makes an excellent meal.

Other Types of Subjects

each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone, and no one = singular verb

Each of these classes is difficult.

Each one of us needs a friend on the camping trip.

Either method of analysis works for me.

Neither time is acceptable.

Everyone is expected to attend each class session, without exception.

Anybody is allowed to swim at the park; it is open to the public.

Nobody keeps poisonous snakes in the dorm.

Somebody is tape recording the professor's lectures and posting them to YouTube.

Someone eats the cookies we leave out for Santa every year, but we don't know who.

No one insults me with impunity and gets away with it.

Collective nouns = singular verbs

These are singular nouns that usually name a group, comprised of members. Here are some examples:

army
audience
board
cabinet
class
committee
company
corporation

council
department
faculty
family
firm
group
jury

majority
minority
navy
public
school
senate
society
team
troupe

Below are some subjects using collective nouns:

The **army** requests \$300 billion for its 2013 operating budget.

The **minority** is protected in a truly fair, democratic system.

The **team** runs hills before and after every practice.

The **faculty** from Edgemark High School was fired *en masse* when it was discovered that some teachers were helping their classes cheat on the statewide standardized tests.

The **committee** is firm in its decision not to implement the new attendance policy.

The **class** takes their midterm examinations on Wednesday.

My **family** travels to North Carolina each July for our family reunion.

“Hidden” Subjects

Sometimes the subject of the sentence is obscured a bit by other phrases between it and the verb—identifying the actor / subject carefully will help you identify the correct verb to use.

The people who believe that President Obama wasn't born in the United States are relatively few.

Speakers of the Arapaho language are getting older, which means that soon the language will die out.

A **president**, even one as popular as Franklin Roosevelt, still needs to follow the laws of this country.

The **space shuttle Discovery**, fresh from its last mission, is scheduled to land at Andrews Air Force Base on Wednesday.

The **dogs**, who smelled horrible from their play in the mud, were welcomed back into the house by the gleeful four-year-old.

All of the software, including the specialized statistics program, is loaded onto the computers in the computer lab.

A healthy diet, in addition to some moderate regular exercise, is recommended by the Surgeon General to reduce the risk of stroke and cardiac disease.

Exercise: Correcting Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

In the sentences below, correct the errors in subject-verb agreement. Each sentence has *at least* one error.

1. The dogs was let in by my uncle after their run in the park.

2. Carol or Darren were traveling last month, so they missed the meeting.

3. Annie walk at least five miles per week to stay in shape; she look great!

4. The committee were not impressed by the applicant's resume.

5. The boys drinks Gatorade after they play basketball.

6. Eleven horses was sick at the stable last week.

7. Jamie, Mitchell, and Jessica is planning to work in Ocean City this summer.

8. The people who drive their cars too fast is causing a major problem on Hilton Parkway.

9. Four different water mains breaks when this area gets way too much rain.
