

Kenyon's WCC Provides Grammar Support—Handout:
Subject-Verb Agreement: Why do we need it?¹

What is subject-verb agreement?

Subject: what the sentence is about

Verb: expresses an action or describes a state of being (i.e. *seems...*)

Subject-verb agreement guarantees that plural subjects go with plural verbs (actions) and that singular subjects go with singular verbs when count nouns (nouns of which there is a quantifiable amount) are used by a writer.

So, for example:

- The three dogs bark. (Dogs is plural so is bark).
- The dog barks. (Dog is singular so is barks.)

As you can see, count gets tricky because often, the verb for singular actions has an S and the noun for plural actions has an S. You have to stay on your toes to stick to clear subject-verb agreement.

Why is subject-verb agreement important?

Agreement in person and number between subjects and verbs is key if one wishes to show their proficiency in academic writing. By keeping subject-verb agreement accurate, your audience is better able to follow along with your points and analysis.

Keep in mind:

- Adjective pronouns (who, which, that) are also in a sentence, usually as a noun phrase. These pronouns do not affect agreement; the verb following these pronouns should still agree with the noun to which the verb refers.
 - o Examples:
 - The student who participates in class often **gets** a better grade.
 - The students who participate in class often **get** better grades.

How can I write using this agreement?

Identify patterns in proficient writing:

1. Many verbs only change in present tense for third person singular forms.² For example:

	Singular	Plural
First Person	I write	We write
Second Person	You write	You write
Third Person	It/ they/she/he <i>writes</i>	They write

2. The verb *be* has its own patterns, offering a wider range of verb forms

	Singular Present	Singular Past	Plural Present	Plural Past
First Person	I am	I was	We are	We were
Second Person	You are	You were	You are	You were
Third Person	He/ she/ they/ it is	She/ he/ they/ it was	They are	They were

¹Adapted from: "Subject-verb Agreement," Subject-verb Agreement—Center for Writing: University of Minnesota.

²Past tense verbs, regardless of subject—I/you/he/we/they—are the same for all subjects.

3. Sometimes, it helps to identify subjects and verbs that are related in a sentence to make sure they're in agreement.
 - a. *Questions to keep in mind:*
 - i. Who (subject) does what (verb)?
 1. She appears tired.
 - ii. What (verb) does who (subject) do?
 1. Example: The care was given by the doctor.
 - b. *Look out for situations in which:*
 - i. The subject and verb are separated by other words
 1. Example: The students in the back row of the auditorium were not paying attention.
 - ii. The subject is delayed (i.e. comes after *there* + a form of *be*: is, are, was, were, will be)
 1. Example: There are many reasons to question the findings of this study.
 - iii. Multiple subjects exist (if so, use a plural verb form!)
 1. Example: The doctors, nurses, and the experienced dietician all consulted on the case.
 2. Example: Salt and pepper add flavor to any meal.
 - iv. Multiple verbs occupy the same sentence (all verbs should agree with the subject)
 1. Example: That instructor provides clear instructions and evaluates papers fairly.

Deciphering whether the subject is singular or plural:

- Cases of either/or and neither/nor:
 - o Verb tense depends on the subjects involved
 - Example: 2 singular subjects mean you need a singular verb.
 - Neither the cathedral nor the castle interests me.
 - Example: 2 plural subjects mean you need a plural verb.
 - Neither the cathedrals nor the castles interest me.
 - Example: 1 plural & 1 singular subject means the verb agrees with whichever subject is closest to it in the sentence.
 - Either my twin brothers or my sister was here.
 - Either my sister or my twin brothers were here.
- Collective nouns:
 - o Group nouns (i.e. staff, committee, audience, group, class, jury, etc.) are considered singular subjects
 - Example: As the team rallies, the crowd goes wild.
 - o Plural nouns (such as members) may be added to draw attention to individuals within a group
 - Example: The team members were arguing vociferously with each other.
- Indefinite pronouns:
 - o Pronouns that do not specifically refer to any person or thing (e.g. anybody, anything, each, either, everyone, everyone, nobody, nor, someone, something, etc.) & use singular verbs
 - Example: Everybody in the study struggles with depression.
 - o Indefinite pronouns—all, any, none, and some—can be either singular or plural, depending on the noun that follows
 - Example: Some of her writing was dark. Some of her poems were dark.

Citation information: This document was compiled by Prof. Scanlon and was last updated September 2022 to be more accessible. If you notice an error, need it in a different format, or have further questions or concerns, please email her at scanlon1@kenyon.edu or stop by and visit one of our tutors in Chalmers library!