

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Most native English speakers know the standard verb-subject combinations by ear. Examples of these combinations are *he talks*, *not he talk* and *she has*, *not she have*.

However, if you don't trust your ear or you find simple sentence formations confusing, just follow these simple rules and you will be ready to write flawless sentences in no time!

- In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in NUMBER (singular/plural) and in PERSON (first, second, or third). The present tense ending **-s (or -es)** is used on a verb if the subject is THIRD PERSON SINGULAR. Otherwise, the verb takes NO ENDING.

| | SINGULAR | PLURAL |
|---------------|-----------|--------|
| First Person | I | We |
| Second Person | You | you |
| Third Person | He/she/it | They |
| | love | love |
| | love | love |
| | loves | love |

- If the concept still confuses you, try answering the following questions to understand when to use the **-s (or -es)** form of a present tense verb.

Is the verb's subject **he, she, it or one?**

↓ NO

Is the subject a **singular** noun (such as parent)?

↓ NO

Is the subject a **singular indefinite** noun – anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, no one, someone, or something?

↓ NO

Use the base form of the verb (love, try, have)

YES →

Use -s form (loves, tries, has)

YES →

Use -s form

YES →

Use -s form

- After learning the basic fundamentals of subject-verb agreement, read and understand these special rules and after some practice, forming correct sentences will be easy!

1. Make the verb agree with its subject, not with the word in between

High levels of pollution **cause** damage to the respiratory tract

The subject is **levels**, NOT pollution

2. With subjects joined with *or*, *nor*, *either...or*, or *neither...nor*, make the verb agree with the part of the subject **NEARER** to the verb

A driver's license or credit card **is** required

See, the term "driver's license" was not used in making the verb agree the sentence. Instead it was the term "credit card"

Neither the lab assistant nor the students **were** able to download the information

3. Treat most indefinite pronouns as SINGULAR

| | | | | |
|----------|-----------|------------|---------|-----------|
| Anybody | Each | Everyone | Nobody | Somebody |
| Anyone | Either | Everything | No one | Someone |
| Anything | Everybody | Neither | Nothing | Something |

Everybody who signed up for the snowboarding trip **was** taking lessons

Everyone on the team **supports** the coach

4. However, a few indefinite nouns such as ALL, ANY, NONE and SOME may be singular or plural DEPENDING on the noun or pronoun they refer to.

Some of our luggage **was** lost

None of his advice **makes** sense

5. Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb

There **are** surprisingly few children in our neighbourhood

There **were** a social worker and a crew of twenty volunteers at the scene of the accident

6. Words such as athletics, economics, measles and news are usually SINGULAR, despite their plural form

Statistics **is** among the most difficult courses in our program

7. Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as words, and gerund phrases are SINGULAR

Lost Cities **describes** the discoveries of many ancient civilizations

Delmonico Brothers **specializes** in organic produce and additive-free meats.

8. Treat collective nouns (e.g. team, audience, crowd, class, family) as SINGULAR unless the meaning is clearly plural

1. SINGULAR

Collective nouns nearly always emphasize a group as a UNIT

The class **respects** the teacher

The board of trustees **meets** in Denver twice a year

2. PLURAL

Occasionally, a collective noun is treated as plural to draw attention to the INDIVIDUAL members of the group

The class **are** debating amongst themselves

If that is the case, it is better to change it to:

The class members **are** debating amongst themselves

Now try answering these exercises to measure how much you learned!

EXERCISE 1

Underline the subject (or compound subject) and then identify the verb that agrees with it.

Everyone in the telecom focus group (has/have) experienced problems with cell phones

1. Your friendship over the years and your support (has/have) meant a great deal to us.

2. Hamilton Family Center, a shelter for teenage runaways in San Francisco, (offers/offer) a wide variety of services.

3. The main source of income for Trinidad (is/are) oil and pitch.

4. The chances of your being promoted (is/are) excellent.

5. There (was/were) a Pokémon card stuck to the refrigerator.

6. Neither the professor nor his assistants (was/were) able to solve the mystery of the eerie glow in the laboratory.

7. Many hours of the driving range (has/have) led us to design golf balls with GPS locators in them.

8. Discovered in the soil of our city garden (was/were) a button dating from the Civil War dating from the turn of the century.

9. Every year, during the midsummer festival, the smoke of village bonfires (fills/fill) the sky.

10. The story performers (was/were) surrounded by children and adults eager to see magical tales.