

Subject-verb agreement

Choosing Correct Verb Forms

A common error in academic writing is the use of the wrong form of the verb for its subject. In other words, the verb form chosen does not agree with the subject of the sentence or clause. Subject-verb agreement errors can affect the clarity of a piece of writing.

Here are some examples of errors in subject-verb agreement:

✗ John live in France.

✓ John lives in France.

The subject **John** requires the third person singular form of the verb *to live* (**lives**).

✗ He were in Italy before that.

✓ He was in Italy before that.

The subject **he** requires the third person simple past form of *to be* (**was**).

✗ Both the United States of America and China supports the new proposal.

✓ Both the United States of America and China support the new proposal.

The subject **both the United States of America and China** requires the third person plural form of the verb *to support* (**support**).

✗ The argument outlined by the politicians are sound and well supported.

✓ The argument outlined by the politicians is sound and well supported.

The subject **argument** requires the third person singular form of the verb *to be* (**is**).



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Identifying the subject of a sentence

The first step in making sure your subjects and verbs agree is to identify the subject of the sentence. Circle the subjects in the following sentences. For each subject, decide whether it is countable or uncountable. If the subject is countable, decide whether it is singular or plural. The answers are at the end of the pamphlet.

1. Only one of the students was awarded an H1.
2. The weather in Melbourne is very changeable.
3. The TV news is a good way of keeping up-to-date with current events.
4. All of the writers, including Chomsky, agree on this matter.

Some general rules

Below are six general rules about subject-verb agreement. The subject of each sentence is in bold.

1. Singular subjects joined by the word 'and' are generally plural.

Both the architect and the interior designer like to push artistic boundaries.

2. Indefinite pronouns (someone, anyone, no-one, anybody, somebody, nobody, one, either, neither) usually take a singular verb.

No-one likes to fail at university.

3. Nouns that are preceded by a quantifier (some, any, all, most) can be singular or plural. This depends on whether the noun is countable or uncountable.

Some of the policies were rejected whilst others were approved. (policies is a countable noun)

Some of the research was conducted at the University of Melbourne. (research is an uncountable noun)

4. After a subject joined by 'either...or', 'neither...nor', or 'not only...but also', the verb tends to agree with the subject nearest to it.

Neither the lecturer nor the students want to reschedule the class. (**want** agrees with **students**)

5. 'There is' and 'there are' agree with the noun that follows.

There is **flexibility** in this kind of management structure.

There are many **advantages** to this kind of management structure.

6. A phrase beginning with a **gerund** (-ing form of the verb) or an infinitive is singular.

Being an auditor is a difficult but challenging job.

Common errors

The following are examples of common errors from the work of some students. The correct form and explanation are also provided.

Examples of common errors	Correct version and explanation
1. Comprehensive planning and following a budget is essential for financial success.	Comprehensive planning and following a budget are essential for financial success. Singular subjects joined by 'and' require the plural form of the verb <i>to be</i> (are).
2. Nobody expect to fail when they start a business.	Nobody expects to fail when they start a business. Indefinite pronouns require a singular verb.
3. Most academics in this area argues that...	Most academics in this area argue that... The subject is academics (not area) so it takes the third person plural form of the verb.
4. Neither China nor Japan wish to enter into the agreement.	<i>Neither</i> China <i>nor</i> Japan wishes to enter into the agreement. Japan is the nearest part of the subject so the form of the verb is singular.
5. There is many questions to be considered here.	There are many questions to be considered here. There is agrees with the noun that follows, 'questions'.
6. To support these plans are vital for our country.	To support these plans is vital for our country. The infinitive verb to support is the subject and takes the singular verb form.

Useful references on subject verb agreement

Swan, M. (1994). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murphy, R. (2004). *Essential Grammar in Use* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (also has exercises for practice and includes answers)

Useful University grammar sites:

Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/>

University of Wisconsin

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/SubjectVerb.html>

University of Oregon

<http://grammar.uoregon.edu/agreement/agreement.html>

Answers

1. Only one of the students was awarded an H1. (Subject = **one** of the students - countable, singular)
2. The weather in Melbourne is very changeable. (Subject = **weather** in Melbourne - uncountable)
3. The TV news is a good way of keeping up-to-date with current events. (Subject = TV **news** - uncountable)
4. All of the writers, including Chomsky, agree on this matter. (Subject = **All** of the writers, including Chomsky - countable, plural)