Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must “agree” in number (singular or plural) and person. The concept of agreement is particularly relevant to:

1) the present simple tense: subjects in 3rd person singular (he, she, it) take verbs with the ending -s
2) the verb to be: it can take forms am/is/are and was/were
3) the verb to have: it can take forms have/has

Note: If a sentence contains a modal verb (e.g. should, can, could, must, may), this modal must be followed by the base form of the verb regardless of the subject’s number and person. For example: The witness must report to the police (not must reports).

Below are the rules for subject-verb agreement.

- Make sure the verb agrees with its subject, not with a word that comes between the subject and the verb (whether in preposition phrases or adjective clauses).

  For example: The samples on the tray in the lab need testing. (prepositional phrases)
  The governor, who declared new policies, was applauded. (an adjective clause)

  Note: A subject can never be a part of a prepositional phrase (e.g. in the lab is a prepositional phrase because it starts with the preposition in, so the noun lab cannot be a subject of a sentence).

- Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject comes after the verb.

  For example: There are surprisingly few children in our neighborhood.

- Treat subjects joined with and as plural.

  For example: Matt and Lisa often write in the morning.
  Sonja’s ability and desire to help are inspiring.

However, when the parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person or thing, treat the subject as singular. In addition, when a compound subject is preceded by each or every, treat the subject as singular.

  For example: Strawberries and cream was a last-minute addition to the menu.
  Each tree, shrub, and vine needs to be sprayed.

- With subjects connected by or or nor (or by either … or or neither … nor), make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

  For example: A driver’s license or credit card is required.

- Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular. Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific persons or things, and include the following: anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, none, no one, somebody, someone, and something.

  For example: Everyone in the class likes the teacher.
Treat collective nouns, or nouns that refer to a group of individuals (e.g. *family, team, class*), as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

For example:  
The class respects the teacher. (singular)  
The classes are debating among themselves. (plural)

Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as terms, and gerund phrases are singular.

For example:  
*Lost Cities describes* the discoveries of many ancient civilizations. (title)  
“Controlled substances” is a euphemism for illegal drugs. (term)  
Encountering busy signals is troublesome to many people. (gerund phrase)

*Adapted from: A Writer’s Reference (7th ed.) by Diana Hacker.*

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