



NO. 41 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Subject-Verb Agreement (1): Finding the Subject

The subject of a sentence and its verb must always agree in number (one, two) and person (first, second, third). A lack of agreement can drastically change the meaning of your sentence — and certainly never impresses your professor. Keeping your subjects and verbs in agreement can be as easy as identifying your subject wherever it is located, or as tricky as remembering a few rules. This handout discusses finding the subject.

The importance of being in agreement.

Kissing monkeys are entertaining.

vs.

Kissing monkeys is entertaining.

The only difference is in the verb, but the meaning of each sentence is very different. Don't end up announcing that you like landing kisses on primates unless that's your intention.

Finding the subject of your sentence.

Ask: Who or what is performing the action? What noun/clause/subject is essential to the basic meaning of the sentence? Is it singular or plural? Is it first, second, or third person?

Example: Dogs eat cats. Who or what carries out the action of the verb "eat?" Dogs! "Dogs" is the subject.

Checking the verb for agreement in number and person.

Now determine how the verb should be shaped to match the subject. Don't be fooled by words that come between the subject and verb, such as appositives, prepositions, clauses and other phrases.

Example: She and I go to the park every Sunday. "She and I" is the subject. There's more than one person going, and one of those is the speaker, so the subject is first person plural. What verb form matches "we"? We go. "Go" is the first person plural of "to go."

Example: The secretary, together with the treasurer, demands a revote. Since the subject is secretary, the verb should be singular third-person — (she) demands. As part of a prepositional phrase, the treasurer is only an aside, not a subject.

Example: Under the table are twenty balloons. The subject is "balloons," so the verb must be plural, even though the nearest word, which can be mistaken for the subject, is singular — "table."

Verbs and subjects to watch out for:

- Linking Verbs: They should agree with the subject, not the complement.

Example: Katie's joy is fudge bars. "Joy" is the subject and "bars" is the complement. Why?

Mostly because of the order of the sentence. Linking verbs are unique in this way, because they do not represent an action. Look at what happens if the order of the nouns is reversed.

Example: Fudge bars are Katie's joy. Now, the subject is "bars" and the complement is "joy."

(continued on reverse)



NO. 41 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Subject-Verb Agreement (1): Finding the Subject, Continued

- **Hidden plurals:** Some words are disguised plurals; others are masquerading singulars.
Example: The data are easily understood. (NOT: The data is easily understood.)
Example: Politics is despicable. (NOT: Politics are despicable.)
- **Antecedents:** “One of the” and “who, which, that” are a deadly combination. The verb form often will depend on the meaning of the sentence, and who “who/which/that” really refers to.
Example: Carla is one of the employees who always work overtime. Meaning: There are many employees who work overtime. Carla is one of them. “Carla is” is the primary subject and verb of the sentence. The complement on this linking verb is “one.” But after “one” comes a series of other phrases: “of the employees who always work overtime.” Who is doing the action in this phrase? The employees. That is who “who” is referring to. That is why the verb should be plural third person — “work” and NOT “works.”
Example: Sam is the only one of the employees who always works overtime. Meaning: There are many employees. Only Sam works overtime. “Sam is” is the primary subject and verb of the sentence. The complement on this linking verb is “one.” The phrases after “one” are “of the employees who always works overtime.” Who is doing the action? In this meaning, Sam is. This “who” is referring to him. He is the one working overtime. That is why the verb should be singular third person — “works” and NOT “work.”

As you can see, the meaning of the sentence is the primary guide. Taking out everything that is not essential to the sentence and moving clauses around can help clarify who is doing what. The other ways to avoid subject-verb disagreement follow clear rules that can be found on handout No. 42: Subject-Verb Agreement (2).

For more information on subject-verb agreement, see

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed): 636-44

<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/sv-agr.htm>

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