Subject-Verb Agreement

What is the sentence?

A sentence expresses a complete thought about something or someone. When you start writing, the sentence is the first thing you must conquer because every book, essay, paragraph starts with a sentence. So, to write well you must know how to write correct and effective sentences.

To be grammatically correct, every sentence must have at least one subject and verb. The simplest sentence has only one subject and only one verb.

Subject/verb agreement defined:

Subjects and verbs need to agree with each other.

You do need to check if your subject and verb agree when they are in third person present singular.

You don’t need to check for agreement if it’s plural or in ANY tense besides present. More to come on this soon!

Subject/Verb Agreement

John jumps.

Kim swims at the community pool every morning.

Julia bakes brownies for her co-workers.

DISagreement!

Running marathons are not fun.

Jack run fast.

Liz and Ryan has been watching bad reality TV.
Tip #1: Find the Verb
In order to tell whether your sentence has Subject/Verb Agreement, you need to be able to identify whether your sentence has a subject and a verb. To do this, always find the verb first.

Main Verbs come in two types: Action Verbs and Linking Verbs

- An Action Verb tells what is happening in a sentence.
- An Action Verb will always answer the question “What is happening?”

Linking Verbs:

Not all verbs show action, some verbs simply link the subject to words that describe the subject.

The most common linking verbs are forms of “be.”

am is are was were

Identifying action words or memorizing linking verbs won’t always help you accurately find the verb(s) in a sentence. Verbs are sometimes action words, but often times they aren’t, and many times nouns, adjectives, and adverbs can show action, so that rule isn’t very helpful, as we can see from the following example:

Taking dangerous risks seems to frighten most hardworking people.

Which words are action words or imply action? Underline those.

Taking dangerous risks seems to frighten most hardworking people.

All of these words could indicate action, but we still haven’t located the verb in this sentence.

A Working Definition of Verbs:

Verbs always tell the time, also known as the tense, of a sentence. The easiest way to find a verb in the sentence is to change the time—past, present, future—of the sentence and then you will find the word that changes tense—the verb.

How do we do this?

Well, choose some time words for the past or future, such as “last year, in the past, next year, in the future,” and then put them in front of the sentence for which you are trying to locate the verb. The word that changes tense IS the verb.
**Tip #2: The Time Test**

The time test has two parts and works like this: you take a sentence and **add the phrase “Next year” and/or “Last year.” The words that change in the sentence when you do this will be the verbs.**

Use the time test to find the verb:

(Last year) Taking dangerous risks seems (“seems” changes to “seemed”) to frighten most hardworking people. **SEEMS = THE VERB**

Here are more examples. Double underline the **verbs.**

- Remember: you can find the **verb** in the sentence by changing the time, and the word or words that change is the verb.

  My parents worked hard to give my sister and I opportunities.

  **Time test to find verb: put “next year” in front of the sentence.**

  Next year, my parents ___________ hard to give my sister and I opportunities.

  My parents want us to have better educational opportunities.

  **Time test to find verb: try “last year” in front of the sentence.**

  Last year, my parents _________________ to have better educational opportunities.

**EXERCISE - Identifying Verbs:**

Now, try these on your own, double underlining the **verb.**

1. My father believes in the value of hard work.
2. I am passionate about creating documentaries.
3. Maintaining our Mexican heritage is still important for my family
4. The library is a place to study, to meet friends, and to use the computers.
**Tip #3: Find the verb, then the subject.**

Now, you know the word(s) that changes tense is the verb. When you proofread your sentence and find a verb, **double underline the verb**. Then, **find the subject and underline the subject once**.

---

**A Working Definition of Subjects:**

The subject is the “who” or “what” that is “doing” the verb. Subjects are easy to find once you’ve located the verb. Subjects usually come before the verbs. **To find the subject of a sentence, ask yourself “who or what is doing the (verb)?”**

The sentence will usually go like this: [who or what] + [verb] + [the rest of the sentence]

Note: The subject will never be in a prepositional phrase. Prepositional phrases begin with: in, on, above, according to, before, at, about, through, under, with, near, of, during....

**For example:**

Taking dangerous risks seems to frighten most hardworking people.

**Ask yourself:** who or what seems to frighten most hardworking people?

**Answer:** Taking dangerous risks

**EXERCISE - Identifying the Subject**

Now, we’ll go back to the same sentences and find the subjects.

1. My father believes that I should become a doctor.

Who or what believes? ____________

2. I am passionate about creating documentaries.

Who or what is passionate? ______________

3. Maintaining our Mexican heritage is still important for my family.

Who or what is still important for my family? ______________

Hint: Look at the example above. Taking dangerous risks was the subject.

4. The library is a place to study, to meet friends, and to use the computers.

What is the place where you can study, meet friends, and use computers? ______________
Tip #4: Subjects, Verbs, and the Letter S
An important rule to know is that present tense subjects and verbs have to agree in number. That means that the verb will either have an s on it or not, depending on the subject.

In the present tense verbs must agree with their subjects. Both must be singular, or both must be plural.

I breathe the air.  He breathes the air.
You breathe the air.  She breathes the air.
They breathe the air.  It breathes the air.
We breathe the air.

You must add an –s or –es at the end of the verb when the subject is a singular third person: he, she, it, or words for which these pronouns could substitute. This is not a problem in the past or future tenses (skipped and will skip, for instance), but becomes trickier in the present tense.

To create the plural/singular

To make a noun plural, we usually add an –s or –es, as in the case of jar to jars or box to boxes. A verb is singular when it is matched with a singular subject. A singular verb, then, usually has an –s or –es ending, as in the case of talks and fixes.

Now that we can locate subjects and verbs, we need to make sure that they agree with each other. Here is a simple formula:

**Singular Subjects and Verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (No S)</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>Verb (+ S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td></td>
<td>Always ends in S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No s on the end (is not plural)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(is, has)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/She/It</td>
<td></td>
<td>(was = only past singular)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Plural Subjects and Verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (+S)</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>Verb (No S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td></td>
<td>No S on the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has s on the end (is plural)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(have, are)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I/You/We/They</td>
<td></td>
<td>(were = only past plural)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE - Present Tense

Put the correct form of the present tense verb in parentheses in the blank.

1. (to consist) An Ironman competition ________________of three parts.

2. (to have) My brother_______________a girlfriend.

3. (to be: is, am, are) The stereotype ________________that athletes ________________more likely to do poorly in school.

4. (to hope) Many women ________________to become professional athletes.

Complicated subjects

Some subjects include phrases that might confuse you into choosing the wrong verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not the noun or pronoun in the phrase.

The person who loathes cats plays only with their tails.  
One of the brothers is missing.  
The computer building, including all of the labs, closes its doors promptly at seven.

Subjects connected by “and” require a plural verb.

John and Jeff drive downtown.

With subjects connected by “or” or “nor” follow the rule for the noun closest to the verb.

A sandwich or muffin is fine.  
Neither rain nor shine helps the soccer field.  
One walnut or two acorns fill a squirrel for a day.

EXERCISE: Complicated Subjects

Double underline the correct verb for each sentence.

1. The yellows in the painting (swirl / swirls) in the blue sky.

2. Martin and his mother (play / plays) backgammon every day after work.

3. A plum, and not the carrots, (provide / provides) valuable nutrients to the body.

4. Martha or Dan’s children (scribble / scribbles) on the wall to create their art.

5. Saving of electricity (take / takes) strong initiative, but benefits all of us.
EXERCISE—Proofreading a Present Tense Paragraph

Find the verbs and subjects in the following paragraph. The verbs should all be in the present tense. Correct the subject-verb agreement problems.

1) Dr. Miller state in her article that men and women is different emotionally and physically. 2) She believes that men avoids emotional issues, but women are more compassionate and sensitive. 3) Miller face the fact about the two different sexes. 4) They acts and thinks very differently about ways of communication. 5) Women tends to looks at problems in several different ways but men looks at problems objectively only. 6) I knows that this point are quite true in the U.S. because the husband always talk about sports while the wife want to talk about relationships and feelings.

~Now, apply these guidelines to your own writing! You can continue to work on this with a tutor or your instructor.~