

Subject – Verb Agreement

Have you ever had a paper returned with “subject/verb agreement” written on it? What does that mean, and how can you fix that for future assignments?

What is subject – verb agreement?

Subjects and verbs are in agreement if singular nouns are matched with the singular form of the verb, or plural nouns are matched with the plural form of the verb.

A simple example of disagreement is a sentence like this: “The dogs runs in the park.” Dogs is a plural noun, but runs is a singular verb. The correct sentence is “Dogs run in the park.” Errors like these can be corrected through careful proofreading. This handout will focus on some of the more tricky areas of subject-verb agreement.

Number of Objects

Use the singular when you’re talking about one object out of several.

“Either the dog or the cat **is** behind the tree.”

This sentence expresses that there is one animal behind the tree, whether it is the cat or the dog. This can get more difficult if one object in a compound subject is plural and the other is singular. In that case, make the verb agree with the closer noun.

“Either the cat or the dogs **are** behind the tree,” or

“Either the dogs or the cat **is** behind the tree.”

Watch out when picking a word out of a class of similar things. If you’re picking out a single thing, use the singular.

“My French class, one of several classes I’m taking in university, **is** going well.”

“One of the cats **is** on the loose.”

In this sentence, **one** is the subject as not all the cats are on the loose-- only one is.

Changing the subject

At times you might want to use words like “along with” or “as well” to add something to a sentence’s subject. Unlike “and,” these phrases don’t pluralize the subject.

“Paul, along with his friend Greg, **is** leaving to play racquetball.”

“Jane, as well as seventeen other people, **is** running for student council.”

Sometimes sentences don’t begin with a subject. If a sentence begins with a word like “there,” the verb should agree with what follows it.

“There **are** some dogs in the park.”

“What **is** the shortest way to the faculty office?”

Collective nouns are words that might appear plural because they involve more than one person but are actually singular. Use the singular form of the verb with them in all cases.

“The group **studies** together.” Or “The team **plays** soccer all summer.”

If these examples don’t cover everything you need to know about subject-verb agreement, check the following websites for more information:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslsubverb.html>

http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/cgi-shl/quiz.pl/sv_agr_quiz.htm

Resources/References

Azar, B. S. (1999). *Understanding and using English grammar*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Hult, C. A., Huckin, T. N., Burgoyne, D. A., & Gooding, R. (2005). *The new century handbook*. Toronto: Prentice Hall.

