



Illinois Wesleyan Writing Center: Subject-Verb Agreement¹

Why is subject-verb agreement important?

Agreement in person and number between subjects and verbs is key if one wishes to show their proficiency in academic writing. By keeping subject-verb agreement clear, your audience is better able to follow along with your points and analysis.

How can I write using this agreement?

Identify patterns in proficient writing:

Many verbs only change in present tense for third person singular forms.² For example:

	Singular	Plural
First person	I write	We write
Second person	You write	You write
Third person	He/she/it <i>writes</i>	They write

**the verb *be* has a wider range of verb forms

	Singular present	Singular past	Plural present	Plural past
First person	I <i>am</i>	I <i>was</i>	We <i>are</i>	We <i>were</i>
Second person	You <i>are</i>	You <i>were</i>	You <i>are</i>	You <i>were</i>
Third person	He/she/it <i>is</i>	He/she/it <i>was</i>	They <i>are</i>	They <i>were</i>

Identify subjects and verbs that are related:

Subject: what the sentence is about

Verb: expresses an action or describes a state of being (i.e. the man *is*, *appears*, *feels*, *has*, *seems*...)

- *Questions to keep in mind:*
 - Who (subject) does what (verb)?
 - What (verb) does who (subject) do?
- *Look out for situations in which:*
 - The subject and verb are separated by other words
 - The students in the back row of the auditorium **were** not paying attention.
 - The subject is delayed (i.e. comes after *there* + a form of *be*: is, are, was, were, will be)
 - There **are** many reasons to question the findings of this study.
 - Multiple subjects exist (if so, use a plural verb form!)

¹ Adapted from: "Subject-verb Agreement," Subject-verb Agreement—Center for Writing: University of Minnesota.

² Past tense verbs, regardless of subject—I/you/he/we/they—are the same for all subjects.

- Salt and pepper **add** flavor to any meal.
- Multiple verbs occupy the same sentence (all verbs should agree with the subject)
 - That instructor **provides** clear instructions and **evaluates** papers fairly.
- *Keep in mind:*
 - Adjective pronouns (who, which, that) are also in a sentence (these pronouns do not affect agreement; the verb following these pronouns should still agree with the noun it refers to).
 - The student who participates in class often **gets** a better grade.
The students who participate in class often **get** better grades.

Deciphering whether the subject is singular or plural

- Cases of either/or and neither/nor
 - Verb tense depends on the subjects involved
 - 2 singular subjects → singular verb
 - Neither the cathedral nor the castle **interests** me.
 - 2 plural subjects → plural verb
 - Neither the cathedrals nor the castles **interest** me.
 - 1 plural & 1 singular subject → the verb agrees with whichever subject is closest to it in the sentence
 - Either my twin brothers or my sister **was** here.
 - Either my sister or my twin brothers **were** here.
- Collective nouns
 - Group nouns (i.e. staff, committee, audience, group, class, jury, etc.) are considered singular subjects
 - As the team **rallies**, the crowd **goes** wild.
 - Plural nouns (such as members) may be added to draw attention to individuals within a group
 - The team members **were** arguing vociferously with each other.
- Indefinite pronouns
 - Pronouns that do not specifically refer to any person or thing (e.g. anybody, anything, each, either, everyone, everybody, nobody, nor, someone, something, etc.) and thus take singular verbs
 - Everybody in the study **struggles** with depression.
 - Each of the subjects **has** been screened.
 - 4 indefinite pronouns—all, any, none, and some—can be either singular or plural, depending on the noun that follows
 - Some of her writing **was** dark. Some of her poems **were** dark.