

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Subject/Verb Agreement

Subjects and Verbs

‡ **Subjects** are nouns or pronouns that tell who or what the sentence is about. They tell who or what is the main actor in the sentence. A **simple subject** is the subject without any words or phrases that modify (describe) it; a **complete subject** is the subject plus all its modifying words and phrases.

‡ **Verbs** are words that indicate action (studies, goes, eats) or states of being (is, feels, seems). They tell what the subject does, that is, the action or state carried out by the actor. A **complete predicate** is a verb plus all the words that modify (describe) it and complete the action. Consider this sentence:

Travis quickly ate the enormous piece of cake.

Who or what is the sentence talking about? **Travis** (subject)
What did Travis do? **ate** (verb)
What is the complete predicate? **quickly ate the enormous piece of cake.**

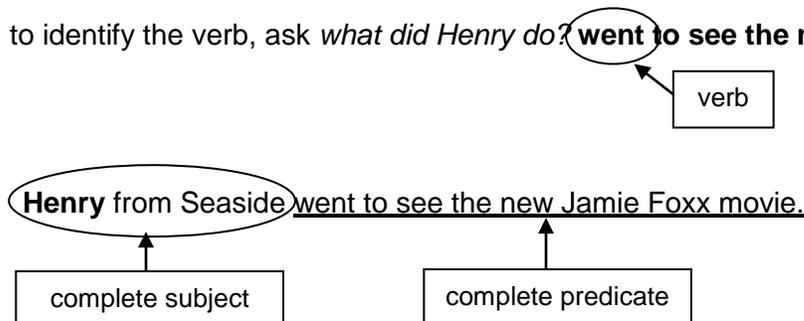
A sentence may contain many people, places, or things, and it may be difficult sometimes to determine the subject. Look at the sentence below:

Henry from Seaside went to see the new Jamie Foxx movie.

To find the simple subject, first eliminate the people or things that are not the main actor in the sentence:

Did **Jamie Foxx** do anything in this sentence? **No.**
Did the **movie** do anything in this sentence? **No.**
Did **Seaside** do anything in this sentence? **No.**
Did **Henry** do anything in this sentence? **Yes!**
Which word is the simple subject (actor) in the sentence? **Henry**

Then, to identify the verb, ask *what did Henry do?* **went to see the new Jamie Foxx movie**



Agreement of Subjects and Verbs

Verbs in English can be formed into several **tenses**, which tell the **time** the action takes place: in the present, in the past, or in the future.

Present: The cowboy **rides** into the sunset.
Past: The cowboy **rode** into the sunset.
Future: The cowboy **will ride** into the sunset.

Verb forms also indicate the number of persons or things doing the action:

One, or **singular**: A **coyote howls** at night.
Many, or **plural**: Three **coyotes howl** together at night.

For a subject and verb to agree, they must be correctly matched in number and person. A **singular** subject (**one** person, place, thing, or idea) must be matched with a singular form of a verb. A **plural** subject (**more than one** person, place, thing, or idea) must be matched with a plural form of a verb.

‡ Agreement in Number and Person

What's the problem? In addition to **tense**, verbs also have **person**, which indicates the "point of view" of the action.

First-person: **I** or **we** are doing the action:
I play the guitar. **We all play** the guitar.

Second-person: **You** (one or many) are doing the action:
You play the guitar.

Third-person: **He, she, it,** or **they** are doing the action:
Richie [he] plays the guitar. The **guitar [it] sounds** nice.
They play the guitar.

Verbs in the **third-person singular in the present tense** add an "s" or "es" to their basic form. This change is a frequent cause of subject-verb agreement errors. No ending is added to basic verb forms for other persons or tenses.

Present: I study, you study, they study...but **she studies** very hard.
I go, we go, they go...but the **lawyer goes** before the judge.

Past: I **studied**, you **studied**, they **studied**...and she **studied**, too.
I **went**, we **went**, the teachers **went**...and Betty **went** to lunch.

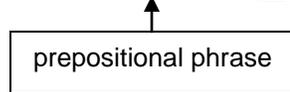
Future: I **will study**, you **will study**, we **will study**...and he **will study**, too.
I **will go**, you **will go**, we **will go**...and Mom **will go** shopping.

Tip: An important exception to the "s" rule is the verb **be**, which is very irregular and has several forms in the present and past: I am, you are, she is, they are, I was, it was, you were, we were.

‡ Nearest Noun Agreement Error

The subject of the sentence determines the verb form even when there are words between the subject and the verb, such as phrases and clauses. For example, the nouns in prepositional phrases can never be the subject of the sentence, so it is useful to eliminate prepositional phrases when checking for subject/verb agreement:

Example: ~~One of the students~~ (is/are) tired.



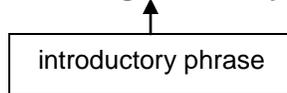
In this sentence, even though there are many students, only **one** is tired. The subject is **one**, even though **students** is nearer to the verb.

Tip: Words that end with “one” and “body” are singular, like the word **one**. Examples include *someone, everyone, somebody, anybody* and *everybody*. The words *neither, either, and each* are also singular.

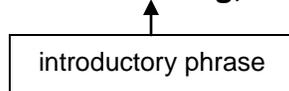
Examples: **Everybody (enjoy/enjoys) a warm, sunny day.**
Neither of my classes (is/are) very interesting.

Tip: Don't be confused by phrases that appear at the beginning of a sentence. When looking for the subject, skip over introductory phrases. They can often be recognized because they are followed by a comma.

Examples: ~~After a late night of studying,~~ one of the students is tired.



~~This morning,~~ one of the students is tired.



‡ Agreement with Compound Subjects

A compound subject is simply two or more subjects joined by the word **and**. If a sentence contains a compound subject, the verb must take the plural form.

Examples: **Writing (is/are) difficult to learn. (singular)**
Writing and reading (is/are) difficult to learn. (plural)
Writing, reading, and arithmetic (is/are) difficult to learn. (plural)

Tip If you are not sure whether a sentence contains a compound subject, try replacing the entire subject with the word **they**. If the sentence makes sense, then you have a compound subject.

They

~~Writing and reading~~ are difficult to learn. (It makes sense; must be plural.)

‡ Agreement with *there is/there was*

In sentences that contain ***there is, there are, there was,*** and ***there were,*** the subject comes immediately after the expression. The subject in this type of sentence does not appear at the beginning.

Example: ~~In the car,~~ **there (is/are) a newspaper and a smiling dog.**

The phrase **in the car** is a prepositional phrase, so it is crossed out because it cannot contain the subject of the sentence. Next, we ask:

What is or are in the car? **a newspaper and a smiling dog**

Is that singular (one item) or plural (more than one item)? **more than one = plural**

Correct: **In the car, there are a newspaper and a smiling dog.**

Tip: Don't be misled. Single words expressing plural ideas (such as dozens, millions, several, etc.) are plural nouns.

Incorrect: **There is dozens of reasons for learning Spanish.**

Correct: **There are dozens of reasons for learning Spanish.**

Incorrect: **There was several birds in the tree.**

Correct: **There were several birds in the tree.**

NOTE: For additional information about subjects and verbs, see also the related handouts on **Nouns, Pronouns, Infinitives, Gerunds, Participial Phrases,** and **Verbs/Verb Tenses.**