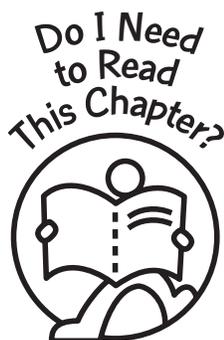

Agreement: Matching Sentence Parts

You should read this chapter if you need to review or learn about



- The grammatical subject of “agreement”
- Making subjects and verbs agree
- Making pronouns and antecedents agree
- Crafting smooth, logical sentences

Get Started



Agreement means that sentence parts match. Subjects must agree with verbs, and pronouns must agree with antecedents. If they don't, your sentences will sound awkward and may confuse your listeners and readers.

Like Peas in a Pod

Romeo and Juliet
 Spaghetti and meatballs
 Peanut butter and jelly
 The birds and the bees

Some things just seem to go together well. We carry this concept over into grammar by matching all sentence parts. This matching of sentence elements is called *agreement*. It helps you create smooth and logical sentences.

The basic rule of sentence agreement is simple: *A subject must agree with its verb in number*. *Number* means singular or plural.

- A *singular* subject names *one* person, place, thing, or idea.
- A *plural* subject names *more than one* person, place, thing, or idea.

Here are some examples:

	Singular Subjects	Plural Subjects
Person:	I	they
Place:	beach	beaches
Thing:	desk	desks
Idea:	freedom	freedoms

1. Singular and plural nouns

In English, the plurals of most nouns are formed by adding *-s* or *-es* to the singular form. For example: bike → bikes; race → races; inch → inches. Some nouns have irregular plurals, such as mouse → mice; woman → women, goose → geese. You can find the plural forms of irregular nouns in a dictionary.

2. Singular and plural pronouns

Pronouns have singular and plural forms, too. Study the following chart.

Singular	Plural	Singular or Plural
I she, he it	we, they	you

3. Singular and plural verbs

As with nouns and pronouns, verbs show singular and plural forms. There are two areas in which you may have difficulty identifying singular and plural forms of nouns: the basic present tense and tenses using the helping verb *to be*.

As you study the following chart, notice that the form of the verb changes only in the third-person singular column, the middle column. Find the *-s* or *-es* added to the verb. That's the tricky part:

- Singular verbs end in *-s* or *-es*.
- Plural nouns end in *-s* or *-es*.

Here are some examples:

First and Second Person	Singular Third Person	Plural First, Second, Third Person
(I, you) begin	(he, she, it) begins	(we, you, they) begin
(I, you) do	(he, she, it) does	(we, you, they) do

As you can see from this chart, subject-verb agreement is most difficult to determine in the present tense.

4. Singular and plural forms of *be*

The form of the helping verb *be* may also help you determine whether a verb is singular or plural. The following chart shows the forms of *be* that are different from singular to plural.

Be Used as a Helping Verb

Singular	Plural
am	(we) are
(he, she, it) is	(they) are
(I, he, she, it) was	(we, they) were
(he, she, it) has been	(they) have been

A Singular Subject Must Have a Singular Verb

Now that you can recognize singular and plural nouns, pronouns, and verbs, you will be able to make all sentence parts agree in number. Remember the rule introduced in the beginning of this chapter: *A subject must agree with its verb in number.*

9. Titles are always singular.

It doesn't matter how long the title is, what it names, or whether or not it sounds plural—a title always takes a singular verb.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is a story about the Spanish Civil War.

sing. subject sing. verb

The singular title *For Whom the Bell Tolls* requires the singular verb *is*.

Stranger in a Strange Land was written by Robert Heinlein.

sing. subject sing. verb

The singular title *Stranger in a Strange Land* requires the singular verb *was*.

Most measurements are singular—even though they look plural. For example: “*Half a dollar is more than enough*” (not “*are more than enough*”).

A Plural Subject Must Have a Plural Verb

Just as a singular subject requires a singular verb, so a plural subject requires a plural verb. Here are some examples:

1. A plural subject must have a plural verb.

Men are from Earth. Women are from Earth. Deal with it.

plural plural plural plural
subject verb subject verb

The plural subject *men* requires the plural verb *are*. The plural subject *women* requires the plural verb *are*.

On average, *people fear* spiders more than *they do* death.

 plural plural plural plural
 subject verb subject verb

The plural subject *people* requires the plural verb *fear* (not the singular verb *fears*). The plural subject *they* requires the plural verb *do* (not the singular verb *does*).

Students at U.S. colleges read about 60,000 pages in four years.

plural plural
subject verb

The plural subject *students* requires the plural verb *read* (not the singular verb *reads*).

Facetious and abstemious contain all the vowels in the correct order, as does arsenious,

 plural plural
 subject verb

meaning “containing arsenic.”

The plural subject *facetious and abstemious* requires the plural verb *contain* (not the singular verb *contains*.) Think of the conjunction *and* as a plus sign. Whether the parts of the subject joined by *and* are singular or plural (or both), they all add up to a plural subject and so require a plural verb.

2. Two or more plural subjects joined by *or* or *nor* must have a plural verb.

This is the logical extension of the rule you learned earlier about two or more singular subjects joined by *or* or *nor* taking a singular verb. Here, since both subjects are plural, the verb must be plural as well.

Either the *children or the adults* are clearing the table.
 plural plural plural
 subject subject verb

Since both subjects are plural, one of them alone is still plural. Therefore, two plural subjects—*children* and *adults*—joined by *or* take the plural verb *are*.

Neither my *relatives nor my friends* are leaving any time soon.
 plural plural plural
 subject subject verb

Since both subjects are plural, one of them alone is still plural. Therefore, two plural subjects—*relatives* and *friends*—joined by *nor* take the plural verb *are*.

3. A compound subject joined by *and* is plural and must have a plural verb.

The conjunction *and* acts like a plus (+) sign, showing that $1 + 1 = 2$ (or $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, etc.).
 Brownies and ice cream are a spectacular dessert.

sing. sing. plural
 subject subject verb

Brownies and ice cream = two desserts. $1 + 1 = 2$. Therefore, the verb must be plural: *are*.
 Nina and Christopher have donated money to charity.

sing. sing. plural
 subject subject verb

Nina and Christopher = two people. $1 + 1 = 2$. Therefore, the verb must be plural: *have*.

4. If two or more singular and plural subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*, the subject closest to the verb determines agreement.

This is basically an exception made for the sake of sound: It sounds better to match the verb to the closer subject.

Margery or the twins are coming on the trip to Seattle.

sing. plural plural
 subject subject verb

Since the plural subject *twins* is closest to the verb, the verb is plural: *are*.

The *twins or Margery* is coming on the trip to Seattle.

plural sing. sing.
 subject subject verb

Since the singular subject *Margery* is closest to the verb, the verb is singular: *is*.

Collective Nouns and Indefinite Pronouns

A *collective noun* names a group of people or things. Collective nouns include the words *class*, *committee*, *flock*, *herd*, *team*, *audience*, *assembly*, *team*, and *club*. Collective nouns can be singular or plural, depending on how they are used in a sentence. Here are the basic guidelines:

- A collective noun is considered *singular* when it functions as a single unit. Collective nouns used as one unit take a singular verb.
- A collective noun is considered *plural* when the group it identifies is considered to be individuals. Collective nouns that indicate many units take a plural verb.

Here are some examples:

The *team* *has practiced* for tonight’s big game for months.
 sing. sing.
 subject verb

The singular subject *team* agrees with the singular verb *has practiced* because in this instance, the team functions as one (singular) group.

The *team* *have practiced* for tonight’s big game for months.
 plural plural
 subject verb

The subject *team* becomes plural because each member of the group is now being considered as an individual.

Indefinite pronouns, like collective nouns, can be singular or plural, depending on how they are used in a sentence. Indefinite pronouns refer to people, places, objects, or things without pointing to a specific one. Indefinite pronouns include words such as *everyone*, *someone*, *all*, and *more*.

- Singular indefinite pronouns take a singular verb.
- Plural indefinite pronouns take a plural verb.

The following chart shows singular and plural indefinite pronouns. The chart also shows pronouns that can be either singular or plural, depending on how they are used in a sentence.

Singular	Plural	Singular or Plural
another	both	all
anybody	few	any
anyone	many	more
anything	others	most
each	several	none
either		some
everyone		
everybody		
everything		
little		
many a		

Continues

Singular	Plural	Singular or Plural
much		
neither		
nobody		
no one		
nothing		
one		
other		
somebody		
someone		
something		

Look back at the chart. You will see that the following patterns emerge:

1. Indefinite pronouns that end in *-body* are always singular. These words include *anybody*, *somebody*, *nobody*.
2. Indefinite pronouns that end in *-one* are always singular. These words include *anyone*, *everyone*, *someone*, and *one*.
3. The indefinite pronouns *both*, *few*, *many*, *others*, and *several* are always plural.
4. The indefinite pronouns *all*, *any*, *more*, *most*, *none*, and *some* can be singular or plural, depending on how they are used.

Here are some examples:

One of the gerbils *is* missing.

sing.	sing.
subject	verb

The singular subject *one* requires the singular verb *is*.

Both of the gerbils *are* missing.

plural	plural
subject	verb

The plural subject *both* requires the plural verb *are*.

All of the beef stew *was* devoured.

sing.	sing.
subject	verb

In this instance, *all* is being used to indicate one unit. As a result, it requires the singular verb *was*.

Many of the guests *are* sick of Tedious Ted’s endless chatter.

plural	plural
subject	verb

The plural subject *many* requires the plural verb *are*.

Special Problems in Agreement

The rules for agreement are straightforward, but some thorny problems do arise. Here are the two most challenging issues: hard-to-find subjects and intervening phrases.

1. Identify hard-to-find subjects.

Some subjects can be harder to find than others. Subjects that come before the verb are especially tricky. However, a subject must still agree in number with its verb, as the following examples show:

In the bottom of the lake *are* two old *cars*.

plural	plural
verb	subject

The plural subject *cars* agrees with the plural verb *are*.

There *were* still half a dozen *tires* in the lake, too.

plural	plural
verb	subject

The plural subject *tires* requires the plural verb *were*.

2. Ignore intervening phrases.

Disregard words or phrases that come between the subject and the verb. A phrase or clause that comes between a subject and its verb does not affect subject-verb agreement.

The strongest *muscle* *in the body* *is* the tongue.

sing.	prep.	sing.
subject	phrase	verb

The singular subject *muscle* agrees with the singular verb *is*. Ignore the intervening prepositional phrase “in the body.”

The *captain* *of the guards* *stands* at the door of Buckingham Palace.

sing.	prep.	sing.
subject	phrase	verb

The singular subject *captain* agrees with the singular verb *stands*. Ignore the intervening prepositional phrase “of the guards.”



Quick Tip

The words *there* or *here* at the beginning of a sentence often signal inverted word order.