Subject-Verb Agreement
A “grammar help worksheet” by Abbie Potter Henry

(Subjects are in bold typeface and verbs are underlined)

Subject-Verb Agreement means that subjects and verbs must always agree in number. Not only does a verb change its form to tell time, but it also can change its form to indicate how many subjects it has.

For example, take the verb “run.” When we are in the present tense, the verb “run” changes form to show that its subject is singular when its subject is anything but “I” or “you.”

Study the following chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular Subjects</th>
<th>Plural Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person:</td>
<td>I run.</td>
<td>We run.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person:</td>
<td>You run.</td>
<td>You all run.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person:</td>
<td>He runs. She runs. The boy runs.</td>
<td>They run.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you notice that in the third person singular, an “s” was added to the verb form? The fact is that all present tense verbs have an “s” added to them when the subject is third person singular.

Think for a moment about the verbs, walk, run, eat, sleep, try, study, and work. Now, give these verbs the subject “I.” I walk; I run; I eat; the pronoun “I” is the only word that can be a first person subject; likewise, the word “you” is the only word that can be a second person subject. The present tense verb for you remains the same as for “I.” You walk; you run; you eat.

However, when we change the subject “I” or “you” to “he,” or “the cat,” we must add an “s.” to each verb. The cat walks; the cat runs; the cat eats; etc. This is a simple rule that most of us automatically use without even thinking, and it applies to every singular third person verb in the entire English language, from walk/walks to run/runs to laugh/laughs to cry/cries. This also includes the helping verbs do/does, is/are, and has/have.

While we are not likely to write or speak the following sentences: I walks; They walks; The cat walk, if we do, we create a Subject-Verb Agreement Error.

Subject-Verb Agreement Errors are very serious and signal that the writer does not have mastery over the English Language. Thus, it is important that writers understand the following thirteen different situations that might cause subject-verb agreement errors. Because of these special situations, there are thirteen corresponding rules to ensure that our subjects and verbs always agree in number.

Once you have gone over these 13 rules and written your own example sentences, you can practice your skill on the website Chompchomp.com. Once on the website, go to “Exercises” and find “Subject-Verb Agreement.” Have fun and keep writing.
13 Rules of Subject-Verb Agreement

1. Two or more subjects joined by “and” are considered plural and require a verb form without an “s.”
   a. Example: Jan, John, and Bob walk to the store.
      Bob and his brothers walk to the store.

2. If a subject is modified by the words “each” or “every” that subject is singular and will take a verb form that ends in “s.”
   a. Example: Each boy and girl walks to the store.

3. If plural subjects are joined by “or,” “nor,” or “but,” the verb must only agree with the subject that is closest to it.
   a. Example: Either Bob or his brother walks to the store.
      Neither Bob nor his brothers walk to the store.
      Not Bob but his brothers walk to the store
      Not Bob but his brother walks to the store

4. Indefinite pronouns* are usually singular and take a verb form that ends in “s.” (You will find a list of indefinite pronouns at the end of this handout.)
   a. Example: Everyone walks to the store.
      b. Everything comes back eventually.

Create your own examples here:

*See page 5 for a complete list of these words.
5. The subject of a verb is never in a prepositional* or verbal phrase. Therefore, you must isolate the phrase and find the proper subject.
   a. Example: The mother **duck** (with all of her little ducklings) **walks** to the store.
      The mother **duck** (including all her ducklings) **walks** to the store.

Create your own examples here:

6. Some indefinite pronouns and nouns will be singular or plural depending on the object of the prepositional phrase. These words are always about number or amount such as: **all, half, some, none, most, part, etc.**
   a. Example: **Some** (of the students) **are** gone.
      **Some** (of the cake) **is** gone.
      The mother **duck** and **all** (of her ducklings) **walk** to the store.

Create your own examples here:

7. When a collective noun, such as **family, group, committee, or class,** is the subject, the verb will end in “s.”
   a. Example: My **family** with all my crazy cousins always **walks** to the store.

Create your own examples here:

8. A few nouns, such as **economics, mumps, measles, or news** end in “s” but are considered singular. You can tell these “s” words are singular because if you take the “s” away, you don’t have a noun. For example, **economic** and **new** are adjectives that describe a noun. **Mump** and **measle** just don’t make any sense.
   a. Example: **Economics** is her favorite subject.

Create your own examples here:

*See page 5 for a list of common prepositions.*
9. When the subject is a unit of measurement of time, distance, money, weight, etc. The unit is considered singular, and the verb will end in “s.”
   a. Example: **Ten pounds** of chocolate *is* too much to eat at once.
   b. **Thirteen feet** of kite string *tangles* very easily.

Create your own examples here:

10. In a question or in a sentence that begins with *there* or *here*, the verb will often come before the subject.
   a. Example: Where *is* my **sweater**?
      There *are* my **sweaters**.

Create your own examples here:

11. The verb must agree only with the subject.
   a. Example: The biggest **problem** we face *is* all the squirrels that have rabies around here.

Create your own examples here:

12. Gerunds (“ing” words) can be subjects and follow all the same rules above.
   a. Example: **Running** with ducks *is* my favorite sport.
      **Running** to the store and **flying** through the air *are* my favorite sports.

Create your own examples here:

13. When using *who, that* or *which*, you must look to the noun these relative pronouns are referring to in order to determine whether the subject is singular and will have a verb ending in “s” or is plural and have a verb without an “s.”
   a. Example: The **girls** who *eat* cake *are* happy.
      The **girl** who *eats* cake *is* happy.

Create your own examples here:
Words that can cause confusion with Subject Verb Agreement

Indefinite pronouns that always take a singular verb form:

anybody  either  neither  one
anyone   everybody  nobody  somebody
anything  everyone  no one  someone
each     everything  nothing  something

Peculiar Pronouns and Nouns that can be singular or plural depending upon context:
(Notice these all refer to amount.)

all       most       some       none       half       part

Common Prepositions
(Remember, a subject never shows up in a prepositional phrase, but these phrases often come between a subject and its verb.)

about    above    across    after    among    around    as
at       because of before  Behind   below    beneath   beside
between  by        during  except  for      from      in
in spite of into    like    near    of      on        onto
over     past      through till    to       toward    under
until    up        upon    with    without

Pronoun agreement

Pronouns that take the place of a noun must be either plural or singular just like the noun they represent.

Example: Everyone has his or her own way of thinking. Correct
Everyone has their own way of thinking. Incorrect

All the rules of pronoun agreement are based on the rules of subject-verb agreement.

Pronouns must also agree in person.
Example: I love the beach because I can get a good tan. Correct
I love the beach because you can get a good tan. Incorrect