

Subject – Verb Agreement

LNC Writing Center Review

Subject – Verb Agreement

The Basics

In the English language, every sentence must contain a subject and a verb. Those subjects and verbs can be plural or singular. To have “agreement,” the verb of the sentence (the main action or state of being) must match with the subject (the noun that is doing or being the verb).

Singular Subject + Singular Verb

(The subject, a cat, is singular, so it is followed by the singular form of the verb “to eat,” eats.)

A cat eats.

The exception to this rule are the pronouns **I** and **you**, which are singular but take the plural form of the verb: *I eat. You eat.*

Plural Subject + Plural Verb

The subject, cats, is plural, so it is followed by the plural form of the verb “to eat,” eat.

Cats eat.

Identify Subject – Verb Agreement

When faced with a question about subject verb agreement, first identify the sentence’s subject(s) and verb(s), then ask yourself whether they match.

The subject of this sentence is my cat, which is singular. The verb is “to run.” The singular form of this verb is runs.

My cat runs all over the house.

The subject of this sentence is also my cat, which is singular. The verb is still “to run,” but it is in the plural form run. Because the subject and verb don’t match, they are not in “agreement.”

Incorrect: **My cat run all over the house.**

Students can often identify correct and incorrect subject – verb agreement if they say it out loud or say the subject and verb right next to each other, even if they are separated in the sample sentence.

One of the 6th grade students who brought their permissions slips is/are absent.

Incorrect: **One of the students are.**

Correct: **One of the students is.**

Plural Subjects

It’s important to remember that subjects ending in an ‘s’ (like cats) are not the only type of plural subjects for a sentence.

Two Subjects Joined by “And”

When “and” connects the subjects of the sentence, the verb is plural. The subjects in this sentence (my cat and my dog) are both singular; there is only one cat and one dog.

However, they are joined together by “and,” which makes the subject of this sentence both of these nouns; thus the subject is plural, and the verb (run) must be plural as well.

Correct: **My cat and my dog run all over the house.**

Sentences like these can be tricky, because if we just identify the noun directly in front of the verb (my dog), it looks as though the subject of this sentence is singular. Make sure to identify the subjects of the sentence, and whether there is more than one, before deciding whether the verb should be plural or singular.

Incorrect: **My cat and my dog runs all over the house.**

Plural Words

If any of these word types are the subject of the sentence, the subject is plural and therefore the verb should be plural.

- Plural nouns that don’t end in ‘s’: **people, feet, men, women, data, children, mice**
- Nouns that are always plural: **clothes, fireworks, headquarters, tweezers**

- Some nouns that are always plural will be called “a pair of”: *scissors, sneakers, pants, socks,*
- Plural pronouns: *both, few, many, several*
 - The indefinite pronoun many is used in this sentence, and is accompanied by the plural form of “to run,” run.
Many cats run all over the house.

Singular Subjects

Some singular subjects can seem plural. Keep the following rules in mind as you identify subjects.

Prepositional Phrases Don't Add Subjects

“And” will always make the subject of a sentence plural when it joins two nouns, but keep an eye out for prepositional phrases that do not make a subject plural.

This sentence has two nouns (my cat and my dog) that look like they could be joined subjects. However, note the use of the prepositional phrase “as well as.” This phrase is signaling that the subject of this sentence is only my cat (singular).

My cat, as well as my dog, runs all over the house.

These prepositional phrases may seem like they are serving the same purpose as “and” (linking two nouns together as the subject of a sentence), but they are not. They do not make the subject of a sentence plural. Some of these phrases include: *in addition to, including, along with, accompanied by, as well as, together with*

Singular Words

If any of these words are the subject of the sentence, the subject is singular and therefore the verb should be singular.

- Multiple nouns that are considered one unit: *peanut butter and jelly sandwich*
- Singular nouns that end in ‘s’: *mathematics, diabetes, United States, economics, measles, Kansas*
- Pronouns that are singular: *everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, someone, somebody, nobody, everything, something, anything, nothing, each, another, either, neither, no one*

- The indefinite pronoun everyone is used in this sentence, and is accompanied by the singular form of “to run,” runs.

Everyone runs all over the house.

Sometimes Plural, Sometimes Singular

There are some circumstances in which you will need to use more clues to identify whether the subject is plural or singular.

Indefinite Pronouns

Some indefinite pronouns can be used to make the subject plural or singular, **depending on which noun the pronoun substitutes or refers to**. Although each of these sentences uses the word “all,” one has a singular subject and one has a plural subject. The noun cake is singular, so it is paired with the singular verb is. The noun cookies is plural, so it is paired with the plural verb are.

All of the cake is gone.

All of the cookies are gone.

Some of these indefinite pronouns are: **any, all, most, more, none, some**

Multiple Subjects

When there is more than one subject, some prepositional phrases and conjunctions can confuse whether the subject is singular or plural. When you see these phrases or words, **use the subject closest to the verb: if, or, nor, either/or, neither/nor, not only/but also**

This sentence has two subjects (my cat and my dogs). But since the phrase “not only/but also” is used, this is a case where the subject closest to the verb determines the agreement. My dogs is closer to the verb of “to run.” My dogs is plural and therefore we use the plural verb run.

Not only my cat, but also my dogs run all over the house.

If the subjects were my cat and my dog, the subject closest to the verb would be singular. The verb, then, would also be the singular runs.

Not only my cat, but also my dog runs all over the house.