

Proofreading Skills Tutorial:

Tutorial #4:
Advanced Subject/Verb Agreement

Agreement When the Subject Is Separated from the Verb

Agreement When the Subject Is an Indefinite Pronoun

Agreement When the Subject Is *Some of* or *All of*

Agreement with *There + To Be* Structures

Writing Center

English 800 Center

All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

Advanced Subject/Verb Agreement

Before you begin this tutorial, we recommend that you complete *the Introductory Tutorial: Recognizing Verbs and Subjects*. Once you have learned how to find verbs and subjects in your writing, it may also be helpful to complete *Tutorial #3: Basic Subject/Verb Agreement* to make sure that you understand the basics of subject/verb agreement. This tutorial will explain more advanced subject/verb agreement, including how to check for agreement:

1. when the subject is separated from the verb
2. when the subject is an indefinite pronoun
3. when the subject is *some of* or *all of*
4. when sentences begin with *there + to be*

As you do this tutorial and learn about advanced subject/verb agreement, try to think about the kinds of subject/verb-agreement errors that your classroom instructor may have pointed out in your writing. If you know what types of errors to look for in your own essays, you will be able to proofread more effectively.

Part One: Reviewing Basic Subject/Verb Agreement

When writers create sentences that use the present tense, the verbs in these sentences must match or agree with the subjects. As a review of basic subject/verb agreement, read through the following chart.

Correct Subject/Verb Agreement	
Subject	Present-Tense Verb
<i>I</i>	Don't add "s."
<i>you</i>	Don't add "s."
<i>we</i>	Don't add "s."
<i>they</i> (refers to people <u>or</u> things) or any noun for which <i>they</i> could substitute	Don't add "s."
<i>he, she, it</i> or any noun for which <i>he, she</i> or <i>it</i> could substitute	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If the verb ends in any letter <i>except</i> "s," "x," "o," "ch" or "y," add "s."• If the verb already ends in "s," add "es."• If the verb ends in "x," "o" or "ch," add "es."• If the verb ends with a consonant + "y" you drop the "y" and add "ies."• If the verb ends with a vowel + "y," simply add "s" to the end of the verb

You can see in this chart that an “s” is added to the end of the present-tense verb when the subject is *he, she, it* or any noun for which *he, she* and *it* could substitute. An “s” is not added to the end of the present-tense verb when the subject is *I, you, we, they* or any noun for which *they* could substitute.

Students make subject/verb agreement errors when they:

- forget to add an “s” to the end of a present tense verb when the subject is *he, she, it* or any noun for which *he, she* and *it* could substitute)
- or*
- add an “s” to the end of a present tense verb when the subject is *I, you, we, they* or any noun for which *they* could substitute.

When you look for correct subject/verb agreement, follow these steps:

1. Find the verb. Is it a present-tense verb? If it is not present tense, you don’t need to worry about subject/verb agreement.
2. If it is a present-tense verb, find the subject. If the subject isn’t a pronoun (*I, you, we, they, he, she* or *it*), what pronoun can substitute for the subject?
3. Finally, use the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart to decide whether to add an “s,” “es” or “ies.”

It is important to complete these steps in this specific order.

If you have completed the *Introductory Tutorial: Recognizing Verbs and Subjects*, you will remember that the way to find the verb is to change the time of the sentence by temporarily adding *today, yesterday* and *tomorrow*, and the word that changes tense in response to these time shifts is the verb. Since it is already written in one of these tenses, the verb will only change one of three times. Now, let’s do one together:

Step One: Identify the verb. Consider the following sentence:

The girls in the story want gold coins.

In the previous sentence, “want” is the verb because it changes tense with the addition of *yesterday* and *tomorrow*. That is, (*yesterday*) the girls in the story wanted gold coins. And (*tomorrow*) the girls in the story will want gold coins. The verb “want” is present tense, so you need to complete steps 2 and 3 to check for correct subject/verb agreement.

Step Two: Find the subject of the sentence. Again, you should remember how to find the subject of a sentence from the *Introductory Tutorial: Recognizing Verbs and Subjects*. Ask *who* or *what* did the verb. That is, who or what wanted gold coins? In this sentence, the answer is clear: the “girls.” “Girls” is the subject. The subject isn’t a pronoun (*I, you, we, they, he, she* or *it*), so you ask: What pronoun can substitute for the subject? The pronoun *they* can substitute for the “girls.”

Step 3: Use the previous chart, “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement,” to decide whether to add an “s,” “es” or “ies.” In the *Subject* column, find the correct row, which is *they* (refers to people or things) or any noun for which *they* could substitute. In the *Present-Tense Verb* column, you can see that you do not add “s” for correct subject/verb agreement.

In the previous sentence, it was easy to complete these three steps. But some sentences are more challenging. Sometimes, the *who* or *what* question does not give us enough information to identify the subject easily.

Part Two: Checking for Agreement When the Subject Is Separated from the Verb

Although there are some exceptions, the usual order for English sentences is the subject first, followed by the verb. As they look for the subject of a sentence, most students know to look for the answer to the *who* or *what* question in front of (or to the left of) the verb.

However, when more than one noun is located in front of the verb, it may not be clear which noun is actually the subject. If this is the case, a student may choose the wrong noun as the subject, and with the wrong subject, it is easy to make an error in subject/verb agreement.

Consider the following sentence:

The flowers in the field often grow dry and brown in the August heat of a California summer.

To find the verb, change the time of the sentence by temporarily adding *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow*. The word that changes tense in response to these time shifts is the verb. Since it is already written in one of these tenses, the verb will only change two of three times.

In the previous sentence, “grow” is the verb because it changes tense with the addition of *yesterday* and *tomorrow*. That is, (yesterday) the flowers in the field *grew* dry and brown. And (tomorrow) the flowers in the field *will grow* dry and brown. The verb “grow” is present tense, so you must check for correct subject/verb agreement.

To find the subject, you should now ask the *who* or *what* question: Who or what often grows dry and brown in the August heat of a California summer? With this sentence, you do not get one clear answer; that is, both *flowers* and *field* make sense as answers. To find the correct subject, you must remember an important principle.

Principle I. Nouns that follow prepositions cannot be subjects.

Following is a list of common prepositions that you can refer to when you are checking for subject/verb agreement. Note that the preposition that most frequently separates a subject from a verb is “of.”

Common Prepositions			
about	for	upon	unlike
above	from	with	during
according to	in	under	by
across	into	between	toward
after	near	below	to
among	of	before	through
around	on	at	over

Keeping Principle I in mind, consider the previous sentence once again:

subject *verb*
The flowers in the field often grow dry and brown in the August heat of California summers.

If you ask the *who* or *what* question with this sentence now, you can see that “field” cannot be the subject of the sentence because it follows the preposition “in.” In fact, “flowers” is the correct subject since it does *not* follow a preposition.

The pronoun *they* can substitute for “flowers.” Thus, according to the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, you do *not* add an “s” to the end of the present-tense verb “grow.”

As you can see, you must be careful; always remember to reread your sentences carefully, and once you have found what you think is the subject, make sure that it does not follow a preposition. Once you have identified the correct subject, you can check to see if the subject and the verb agree.

It is a good idea to copy both Principle I and the list of common prepositions into your notebook so that you can refer to it as you proofread your essays for correct subject/verb agreement.

Exercise 1

Instructions: The following sentences are all written in present tense. Although some of the present-tense verbs are correct for their subjects, others are not. First, find the verb and underline it. Then, using Principle I, find the subject and put brackets around it. Finally, referring to the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, check for correct subject/verb agreement. Remember to use present tense in your corrections. The first one has been done for you.

- subject* *verb*
1. A [group] of skilled ballerinas perform brilliantly on stage each season in San Francisco.
performs

Once *yesterday* and *today* are added to this sentence, it is clear that the verb is “perform.” To find the subject, we ask “Who or what perform brilliantly on stage each season in San Francisco? Both “group” and “ballerinas” make sense as answers. However, the noun “ballerinas” follows the preposition “of.” According to Principle I, a noun that follows a preposition *cannot* be the subject of a sentence. Therefore, “group” is the subject of the sentence. The pronoun *it* could substitute for the noun “group.” According to the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, when the subject of a sentence is any noun for which *it* could substitute, you must add “s” to the end of the present-tense verb.

2. Our dog, unlike our cats, go for long walks and chew on large bones.
3. One of the bowls belong to his mother.
4. The movie about drag queens from different parts of Cuba intrigue Margaret.
5. During lunch, teachers in the school grades papers or talks about plans for the weekend.
6. The roses in the greenhouse shows sensitivity to light.

Part Three: Checking for Agreement When the Subject Is an Indefinite Pronoun

Often it is difficult to determine if a subject is singular. Following is a list of indefinite pronouns that, when used as subjects, are always singular and require present-tense verbs with the “s” ending.

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

Principle II. When an indefinite pronoun is the subject of a sentence, you should choose the present-tense verb that is correct for the singular subjects, *he, she, or it*.

In the following sentence, the verb is underlined and the subject, which is an indefinite pronoun, is bracketed. Using Principle II and the “Correct Subject Verb Agreement” chart, you can see why the first sentence is incorrect while the second one is correct.

subject verb

Incorrect: [Everyone] love chocolate bars.

While “all” may seem like a lot (plural), “cake” is the essential word here. It doesn’t matter how much cake you have—it is still only part of one cake; that is, “all” is singular in this sentence. The singular pronoun *it* could substitute for “all of the cake.” Therefore, according to the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, the “s” at the end of the present-tense verb “tastes” is correct.

Now, consider the following sentence:

subject *verb*
[Some] of the cars exceed the speed limit on Highway 280.

Once you have identified the verb and the subject, you should look at the word “cars,” which follows “some of.” The word *cars* is a plural noun. In this case, “some of” refers to more than one car; *they* could substitute for “some of the cars.” Therefore, according to the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, the present-tense verb “exceed” is correct.

Principle III. When *some* or *all* are the subjects of the sentence, look at the prepositional phrase beginning with “of” to see if the noun that follows the preposition is plural or singular. If the noun is plural, do not add “s” to the present-tense verb. If the noun is singular, add “s” to the present-tense verb.

Exercise 3

Instructions: The following sentences are all written in present tense. Although some of the present-tense verbs are correct for their subjects, others are not. First, underline and label the verb. Then, put the subject in brackets and label it. Using Principle III and the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, check for correct subject/verb agreement. Remember to use present tense in your corrections. The first one has been done for you.

- subject* *verb*
1. [Some] of the forest look dead.
 looks

(Once you have identified the verb and the subject, you look at the word “forest,” which follows “some of.” The word “forest” is a singular noun. In this case, “some of” refers to a portion of a single forest; the pronoun *it* could substitute for “some of the forest.” According to the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement” chart, you should add “s” to the present-tense verb, “look.”)

2. Some of the children fails to learn to read by age seven.

3. Some of the water evaporates before used.
4. All of the art interest me.
5. All of the lions frighten children who visit the zoo.

Part Five: Checking for Agreement in Sentences with There + “To Be” Structures

Consider this sentence:

There are seven [people] in the car.

After you have identified the verb of this sentence, “are,” you find the subject by asking, Who or what are in the car? Because “people” is the answer, “people” is the subject of the sentence; *they* could substitute for “people.” As you can see, the subject comes *after* the verb. Note that even though most frequently, you will find the subject in front of the verb in an English sentence, the subject is located *after* the verb in there + “to be” constructions.

In the **Subject** column of the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement for There + To Be Structures” chart below, beside “any noun for which *they* could substitute,” you can see that “are” is the correct present-tense verb for the subject, “people.”

Correct Subject/Verb Agreement for There + <i>To Be</i> Structures		
Subject	Present-Tense Verb	Past-Tense Verb
any noun for which <i>they</i> could substitute (plural)	are	were
any noun for which <i>he</i> could substitute (singular noun)	is	was
any noun for which <i>she</i> could substitute (singular noun)	is	was
any noun for which <i>it</i> could substitute (singular noun)	is	was

The verb “be” is unique because you must check for correct subject/verb agreement in sentences that use both the present-tense and past-tense verbs. That is, when proofreading your essays for

subject/verb agreement, you must pay attention not only to present-tense forms of *be*, but also to past-tense forms of *be*. It may be helpful to refer to this chart as you proofread your essays.

Often, students begin a sentence with “There is” or “There was”—singular constructions—and follow with a plural subject. This is wrong because the subject and the verb do not agree.

verb *subject*

Incorrect: There is seven [people] in the car.

As you have just learned, although the subject follows the verb in this type of sentence, the subject and verb still have to agree.

verb *subject*

Correct: There are seven [people] in the car.

Principle IV. In *there + to be* structures, you will find the subject after the verb. Use *is* or *was* for singular subjects, and use *are* or *were* for plural subjects.

Exercise 4

Instructions: First, underline and label the verb. Second, put the subject in brackets and label it. Using Principle IV and the “Correct Subject/Verb Agreement for There + *To Be*” chart, check for correct subject/verb agreement. The first one has been done for you.

- verb* *subject*
1. Tonight, there is too many [stars] in the sky to count.
are

(The subject is plural; the pronoun *they* can substitute for “stars.” Thus, the verb should be “are.”)

2. There was several birds with clipped wings that Helen could choose from.
3. On the table, there is three white mugs.
4. There is crowds of people protesting the war in front of the Capitol Building.
5. There was many reasons that I could write my essay last night.
6. At the end of the street, there was many dogs begging the man for bones.

Exercise 5

Instructions: In the following exercise, use Principles I, II, III and IV to correct the verbs that don't agree with their subjects. Remember to use present tense in your corrections. The first one has been done for you.

1. Tonight there ^{are} ~~was~~ many people at the restaurant.
2. A pile of books sit before her.
3. Nobody on the trip know how to change the tire or jumpstart the battery.
4. There is six reasons that the Giants are going to win the World Series.
5. A big group of women now searching for jobs are having no luck.
6. Everybody in the kitchen know how to make tacos.
7. Every night, all of the water evaporate.
8. Some of the women tell different stories.
9. In the band, some of the trombone players stands during their solos.

Exercise 6

Instructions: This passage contains many of the agreement problems that we have gone over in this unit. Using Principles I, II, III and IV, correct any subjects or verbs that don't agree with each other. Remember to use present tense in your corrections. If you have any difficulty, try reading the passage aloud and reviewing the information in this unit.

Within the state of Arizona, Rob move frequently, from city to city. After his arrival, one of his first tasks are to find an apartment close to work as he do not have a car. Usually, there is many different places to choose from, and he consider cost, location, and luxury. If one apartment has a washing machine and dryer and cost four hundred dollars a month, he prefer to rent it over another apartment with significantly less rent located two blocks from a laundromat. He never rents an apartment on the thirteenth floor since he fear heights. He also try to choose an apartment with landlords recommended by former tenants. Everybody know that it is important to find a responsible landlord. Rob and his best friend love to cook together when his friend visits, so he need a spacious, well-equipped kitchen. Rob often also look for a place with an air conditioner because there is so many scorching days and nights in Arizona. Whenever Rob find a new apartment, all of his concerns disappears. He feel relieved and call his mother. Someone understands!

Exercise 7

Instructions:

1. Review an essay where your teacher has graded and marked your subject/verb agreement errors. Are there any patterns in your errors? Knowing what to look for during proofreading can make it easier to find your subject/verb agreement errors.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay