Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must agree in both number and person. Number shows whether the subject is singular or plural. A singular subject must take a singular verb, and a plural subject must take a plural verb. Person shows the identity of the subject of the sentence: the person speaking (first person), the person who is spoken to (second person), and the person who is being spoken about (third person).

Note: In the examples throughout this handout all the subjects are **boldfaced**, and all the verbs are *italicized*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First person</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person</td>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Agreement: first and second person**

Subjects and verbs in the first and second person agree in the same way. When using the subjects I, we, and you the verb does not include an “s” at the end.

- I *scream*, you *scream*, we *all scream* for ice cream

This is a good memory device because the sentence includes both first person (I, we) and second person (you) subjects, and every time “scream” is used there is no “s.”

**Agreement: third person**

The remainder of this handout will address subject-verb agreement for third-person.

- When writing in the third person, verbs carry an “s” if the subject is singular; omit the “s” if the subject is plural.

Think of third-person agreement as a “trade-off” of “s” endings between the subject and the verb. If the subject ends in “s,” then the verb will not. If the verb ends in “s,” then the subject will not. The “trade-off” rule still applies to irregular plural nouns and pronouns that do not end with an “s” (children, salmon, they, these...). Verbs associated with these plural subjects should not end with an “s.”

- Salmon *migrate* upstream every fall. They *return* to the streams where they were hatched.

Verbs that are paired with auxiliary (helping) verbs do **not** follow the “trade-off” rule. The verb does not get an “s” ending even if the subject is singular.

- A salmon *will remember* the location of its home stream.
- It *should spawn* in the same stream.

Subjects and verbs must still agree, even if there is a clause separating them.

- Beverly, who is in the first year of her undergraduate degree, *studies* very hard.
My friends in the next town love salmon for dinner.

In this case, ignore the clause separating the subject and the verb, and focus on making the subject and the verb agree.

**Compound Subjects**

In most cases, compound subjects that are joined with “and” are treated as plural subjects. The exception to this rule is when both items in a compound subject refer to the same person, place or thing.

- No matter what subject she teaches, this **expert and researcher cares** greatly for her students.

Here, both “expert” and “researcher” describe one person.

Another exception to the rule of treating compound subjects as plural is when “or” or “nor” comes between the parts of a compound subject. In this case, the verb agrees with the part of the subject that is closest.

- Neither **Sarah nor James eats broccoli**.

**Indefinite Pronouns**

Indefinite pronouns are words that do not rename any particular person, place or thing. They take a singular or a plural verb form depending on the word and the context. The table below briefly shows which indefinite pronouns take singular or plural forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indefinite pronoun</th>
<th>Verb form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>another, any, anybody, anyone, anything, each, each one, either, every, everyone, everything, more, much, neither, nobody, none, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something</td>
<td>Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>both, ones, others</td>
<td>Plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all, any, more, many, enough, none, some, few, and most</td>
<td>Use singular or plural verb form, depending on context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To determine when the indefinite pronouns in the bottom of the table use a singular or a plural verb form, pay attention to the noun that they refer to. You can also try substituting the pronoun with he, she, it or they. For example:

- Millions of Canadians are called for jury duty each year, but **most** never actually **serve** on a jury.

In the sentence above, “most” refers to “Canadians,” so “most” acts like a plural subject. The sentence would still be grammatically correct if you used “they” instead of “most,” but some of the sentence’s meaning would be lost. “Most” tells us that many, but not all, of the Canadians never serve on a jury.

In the sentence below, “most” refers to “trial testimony,” so “most” acts like a singular subject. You could also substitute “it” for “most.” That is why the verb “remain” ends with an “s.”
Some trial testimony can be highly dramatic, but most remains fairly tedious.

Collective Nouns
Collective nouns are nouns that refer to single units made up of multiple parts, such as groups of people. Some collective nouns include: family, audience, crowd, group, team, band, staff, and faculty. Collective nouns agree with their verbs in either a singular or a plural sense, depending on whether the sentence refers to the actions of the single unit or the actions of the people who make up that unit.

- My favorite football team wins very often.
- The team have similar ideas about the best scoring tactics.

If you think the second example sounds awkward, it is acceptable to add a plural noun such as “members” to make the sentence clearer.

- The team members have similar ideas about the best scoring tactics.

Nouns that sound plural but are singular
Some nouns sound plural, but they are actually singular; for example: economics, athletics, politics, mathematics, physics, or news.

- News of snow flurries makes me stay inside and play video games.

However, there are some singular nouns that sound plural, and also take a plural verb. These are words such as trousers, pants, or scissors.

- My pants have a hole in the knee!

Reference