



## University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Subject-Verb Agreement

### The Basics of Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is a common grammatical pitfall for students. Verbs must agree with their subjects in **number**: if a subject is singular, the verb must also be singular, and if a subject is plural, the verb must also be plural.

This is most commonly an issue when writing in the **present tense**; most English past tense verbs have the same form for singular and plural subjects (e.g., “she wrote,” “we wrote.”)

English nouns are usually made plural by putting an **s** at the end of a word; English verbs ending in **s**, however, are **singular**. As a general rule, in the present tense, **only** the subject or the verb will end in the letter **s**. If the subject is plural, it will end in **s**, but the verb will not; if the subject is singular, the verb will end in **s**, but the subject will not.

Here are some correct and incorrect examples.

- **Incorrect**: The *student* **write** a paper.
- **Incorrect**: The *students* **writes** a paper.
- **Correct**: The *student* **writes** a paper.
- **Correct**: The *students* **write** a paper.

Watch out for irregular forms when evaluating your subject-verb agreement! This is most common with verbs (e.g., “is” and “are,” “was” and “were,” “had” and “have”), but some nouns also have irregular plurals (e.g., “person” in the plural is usually “people,” rather than “persons”).

Sentences are commonly structured so that a number of words, including other nouns (which may be different in number), come between the subject and the verb. When evaluating whether your subject and verb agree, one way to ensure that your grammar is correct is to isolate your subject and your verb, ignoring any other words in the sentence:

- The students in the class write a paper.
- **The students** ~~in the class~~ **write** ~~a paper~~. = The students write.
- “The students” are the subject, and they are plural; **write** is therefore the correct form.

## Other Rules of Subject-Verb Agreement

**Linking verbs:** these are verbs like *is*, *look*, and *seem*, which connect a subject and its complement. When the subject and complement are different in number, the linking verb should always agree with the noun *before* it.

- The best part of my job **is** my colleagues.
- My colleagues **are** the best part of my job.

**Uncountable nouns:** these are nouns which express concepts or things which are not counted individually; sometimes they're abstract (like *knowledge*, *happiness*, or *time*), but sometimes they're more concrete (like *research*, *furniture*, or *water*). These are always treated as singular.

- The water **tastes** good.
- The research **is** extensive.

**Collective nouns:** these are singular nouns which refer to a group as a whole (like *family*, *committee*, *class*, *group*). The verb agreeing with these must also be singular.

- The committee **decides** if a degree is conferred.
- The class **attends** the guest lecture.

**Indefinite pronouns:** these are words like *someone*, *everyone*, *each*, *every*, *anyone*, or *something*. They are always singular, even if they seem plural in sense.

- Anyone **is** capable of writing well.
- Everyone **learns** a lot in graduate school.

**Subjects using *and*:** when a subject is made up of two words connected with *and*, it is usually plural. If, however, the two things linked with *and* are actually one thing, the verb should be singular.

- The student and professor **work** together. ["The student and professor" are a plural subject, so the verb is plural.]
- The graduate student and teaching assistant **is** very tired. ["The graduate student and teaching assistant" is one person with two titles; thus, the verb is singular.]

**Subjects using *or/nor*:** when a subject is made up of two words connected with *or* or *nor*, the verb should agree with the noun closer to it in the sentence.

- Either the professor or their teaching assistants **lecture** to the class.
- Neither the teaching assistants nor the professor **knows** the answer to the question.

**Participle or infinitive subjects:** participles (words based on verbs which end in -ing) and infinitives (*to do something*), when used as subjects, are treated as singular subjects.

- Writing **is** sometimes challenging.
- To earn a graduate degree **takes** a long time.