

Editing for Subject-Verb Agreement

This resource explains how to identify and correct problems with subject verb agreement.

Subject-verb agreement is an issue that should not concern you while you are first composing a paragraph or essay. Instead, you should review your draft for subject-verb agreement during the editing or proofreading stage after you've written the content of the paper.

The basics

A verb must end with "s" in only one case in English:

-in the **present tense** with a **third-person singular** subject

Singular Subject	Subject	Verb
1 st	<i>I</i>	<i>provide</i>
2 nd	<i>You</i>	<i>provide</i>
3 rd	<i>He / She / It</i> <i>John, student, pen, Vancouver</i>	<i>provides</i>
	<i>They*</i>	<i>provide</i>
Plural Subject		
1 st	<i>We</i>	<i>provide</i>
2 nd	<i>You</i>	<i>provide</i>
3 rd	<i>They</i> <i>students, cities, theories, systems</i>	<i>provide</i>

* It is grammatically correct to use "they" as a singular pronoun. However, when you use "they" as a singular subject in the simple present tense, **do not** add an "s" to the verb.

He washes the dishes every day.
They wash the dishes every day.

John refuses to do the dishes.
John and Mike ignore the dishes.

The **present-tense third-person singular** verb form appears frequently in academic English because it is used in various ways:

- to describe and explain (*Water surrounds Vancouver.*)
- to state facts, generalizations, and concepts (*Culture structures interactions.*)
- to act as a helping verb for complex verbs: present perfect, present progressive, passive, negative, and question form (*John has finished another assignment. John is finishing his work. Does John have an assignment?)*

Because the "s" at the end of a verb is used so frequently in academic writing, the rules for subject/verb agreement are important to learn and use.

Complications with subject-verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement is often straight forward, but the following issues can confuse writers.

1. When the subject is a noun we don't count

English has a confusing group of nouns that cannot be counted, and these uncountable nouns are treated as singular nouns for subject/verb agreement. For example, we don't count *water*, *happiness*, or *gold*. In the sentence, "Water exists in many forms," the word "water" can be replaced by "it," so we treat water as a singular subject.

2. When words come between the subject and the verb

Sometimes it's difficult to decide which noun in a sentence is the subject of a verb. This often happens when the subject is separated from its verb by a phrase or group of words.

Which of the following examples uses the verb *help* correctly?

- a. *Electrical outlets in the library help students recharge their phones.*
- b. *Electrical outlets in the library helps students recharge their phones.*

The true subject for the verb *help* is *outlets*, not *the library*. It is a mistake to only look at the noun that comes directly before the verb.

3. When the subject is a word like who, which or that

In the following two example sentence, an "s" comes after the pronoun "who" in the second sentence but not in the first sentence.

- This phone works best for people who need a large screen.*
She met a man who works for the phone company.

Look for the noun that comes before the pronoun *who*, *which* or *that* to decide if the verb needs a singular "s."

4. When the verb comes before the subject

In some sentences, the verb comes before the subject. Look at the following pairs of sentences.

- *In the corner of the living room are two china dogs.*
In the corner of the living room is one china dog.
- *There is a stain on the carpet.*
There are stains on the carpet.
- *Why are Paul and Simon so tired?*
Why is Paul so tired?

5. When the noun has an irregular form

Irregular Plural Nouns

Usually plural nouns in English have an "s" or "es" on the end. However, some plural words do not. For example, *people*, *children*, *sheep* and *mice* are plural words.

Irregular Nouns

Nouns like *staff*, *team*, and *criteria* confuse many writers. Are they plural or singular? Check a dictionary for example sentences for how to use them.

6. When the subject is an indefinite pronoun like each, anybody or both

Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular nouns (*one*, *anyone*, *everyone*, *someone*, *nobody*, *anybody*, *everybody*, *somebody*, *nothing*, *anything*, *everything*, *something*, *each*, *either* and *neither*). The only indefinite pronoun to treat as plural is *both*.

- Everybody is coming at 6:00.*
Both are late for class.