SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Subject-verb agreement refers to using forms of characters and actions that match each other grammatically. Once you understand verb conjugation, you can see how these two pieces need to fall into place with one another. In English, subject-verb agreement usually comes down to whether the nouns and verbs are singular or plural.

TYPES AND EXAMPLES

Basics: A singular subject must match a singular verb, just as a plural verb must match a plural subject. You may change either as long as the two correspond to one another; however, be sure that the meaning of the sentence remains accurate.

- Due to hard work, the student write a strong paper.
- Due to hard work, the student writes a strong paper.
- Due to hard work, students write strong papers.

- This particular tutor develop the resource.
- These tutors develop the resource.
  While the sentence above becomes grammatically correct, now it is factually incorrect.

And/Or: Any two subjects combined with and serve as a joint, plural subject because multiple subjects act together. Any two singular subjects combined with or remain singular, since only one truly performs the action. Two plural subjects combined with or remain plural.

- The supervisor and her assistant works hard.
- The supervisor and her assistant work hard.

- Nikki or her boss review the paperwork.
- Nikki or her boss reviews the paperwork.

- The tutors or the coaches holds a meeting.
- The tutors or the coaches hold a meeting.

Singular and Plural Together: When a sentence using ‘or’ (or ‘nor’) contains both a plural subject and a singular subject, match the verb to the subject closest to it.

- The professor or the tutors gives the student feedback.
- The professor or the tutors give the student feedback.
- The tutors or the professor give the student feedback.
- The tutors or the professor gives the student feedback.

Check out the “To Be Verbs” resource for more information on verb conjugation, including a visual aid for the connection between tense, number, and person.
Collective Nouns: Some subjects refer to multiple people, which sounds plural, but remain as singular nouns themselves. These are nouns describing groups, such as ‘class,’ ‘family,’ ‘crowd,’ and ‘flock.’

- The swarm of bees pollinate the flowers.
- The swarm of bees pollinates the flowers.

Notice that even though the word ‘bees’ is plural, the actual subject of the verb is the singular, collective subject ‘swarm.’

Words that Imply Number: Some subjects, such as those that end in ‘one’ or ‘body’ (nobody, everyone, etc.) imply singular. Other words, such as ‘all,’ and ‘many,’ imply plural.

- Everybody want good grades.
- Everybody wants good grades.
- Is both of them going to the party?
- Are both of them going to the party?

Note that the same rules apply even if the verb comes before the subject, such as in a question.

Special Cases: Every so often, you will encounter a subject that appears plural in structure but really refers to a singular idea. A good example of this is ‘the news.’ It is somewhat similar to collective nouns.

- The measles are a dangerous disease.
- The measles is a dangerous disease.

THE SUBJECT-VERB CONNECTION

The previous sentences were simpler fixes because the verb immediately followed the subject. However, writers often make agreement errors when they place the subject and verb far apart.

- Our tutors at the Writing Lab is interested in students’ concerns about their writing.
- Our tutors at the Writing Lab are interested in students’ concerns about their writing.
- The students of the university that worship God, after each completing his or her degree program, whether Law, Government, or Divinity, receives their diplomas.
- The students of the university that worship God, after each completing his or her degree program, whether Law, Government, or Divinity, receive their diplomas.

While it is correct to simply fix the error, consider revising for clarity and concision as well. The same confusion that caused the error may also confuse the reader. You have many options for revising, such as breaking the sentence into multiple sentences, moving phrases that interrupt the subject-verb connection to the beginning or end of the sentence, or changing the wording itself.