

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT 2: THE RULES

No. 42 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Determining the subject of a sentence is not always easy. Reading aloud can help fix agreement problems, but sometimes what is grammatically correct is not what we say (shocking, no?). In these cases, there are rules that can help you decide on your verb tense or form.

Grammar rules to watch out for

- Compound subjects: Sometimes, the number of the subject is hard to determine.

Example: My mom and my dog like to play Frisbee. Two separate subjects = plural subject.

Example: My pet and best friend is my dog. Two subjects, same person or thing = single subject.

Example: Each elephant gets a ton of peanuts a day. "Each" and "every" indicate a single verb form.

Example: Neither the parakeet nor the mice know what happened. OR

Neither the mice nor the parakeet knows what happened. With "neither...nor," "either...or," and just "or" the verb agrees with the closest subject.

- Collective nouns: Some nouns include a group of people (like the word "group.") These subjects can be singular or plural depending on meaning. Are you talking about the group as a unit (singular) or as individuals (plural)? When in doubt, chose singular.

Example: The faculty decides on courses for the next year. The faculty act as one.

Example: The faculty disagree on which courses to offer next year. The faculty are acting as individuals.

- Indefinite-pronoun subjects: These subjects are usually singular.

Example: Nobody knows the rate of pizza consumption.

Both, few, many, others and several are plural:

Example: Few of the teachers know the rate of pizza consumption.

All, any, enough, more, most, none, part, and some can be either, depending on the reference:

Example: Some of the students know the rate of pizza consumption.

Example: Some of the pizza was consumed.

- Gerund phrases, titles of works, company names, and words as words: All singular.

Example: Walking to the store is tragic, but The Grapes of Wrath is more tragic.

Finally, don't rely on computer grammar checks. Only you really know what your subject is.

For more information on subject-verb agreement, see

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed), 636-44

<http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/sv-agr.htm>

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/SubjectVerb.html>



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