

common subject verb agreement issues

Understanding Common Subject-Verb Agreement Issues

Subject-verb agreement is a fundamental cornerstone of clear and correct English grammar. Failing to match subjects with their corresponding verbs can lead to confusion, diminish credibility, and undermine the intended meaning of your writing. Many writers, from beginners to seasoned professionals, occasionally stumble over these rules, especially when dealing with complex sentence structures, tricky subjects, or specific grammatical nuances. This article delves deep into the most prevalent subject-verb agreement issues, providing clear explanations and practical examples to help you master this essential skill. We will explore how to correctly identify subjects, understand the impact of intervening phrases, handle collective nouns, deal with indefinite pronouns, and navigate the complexities of compound subjects, ensuring your writing is grammatically sound and impactful.

Table of Contents

- Understanding Common Subject-Verb Agreement Issues
- The Core Principle of Subject-Verb Agreement
- Common Pitfalls in Subject-Verb Agreement
 - Intervening Phrases and Clauses
 - Compound Subjects
 - Subjects Joined by 'and'
 - Subjects Joined by 'or' or 'nor'
 - Indefinite Pronouns
 - Collective Nouns
 - Subjects That Follow Verbs

- Sentences Beginning with 'There' or 'Here'
- Questions
- Words That Appear Plural but Are Singular
- When the Subject is a Gerund or Infinitive
- Titles of Books, Movies, and Organizations
- Mastering Subject-Verb Agreement: Tips and Strategies
- Conclusion: Achieving Grammatical Excellence

The Core Principle of Subject-Verb Agreement

At its heart, subject-verb agreement is simple: a singular subject requires a singular verb, and a plural subject requires a plural verb. This foundational rule is the basis for all other complexities. For instance, "The dog barks" uses a singular subject ("dog") and a singular verb ("barks"). Conversely, "The dogs bark" uses a plural subject ("dogs") and a plural verb ("bark"). Understanding this basic pairing is the first step to avoiding common subject-verb agreement errors. The verb must agree in number (singular or plural) with its subject, regardless of other words that might be present in the sentence.

Common Pitfalls in Subject-Verb Agreement

While the core principle is straightforward, several common grammatical scenarios can complicate subject-verb agreement. Recognizing these pitfalls is key to consistent accuracy. These issues often arise from misidentifying the true subject of the sentence or being misled by surrounding words.

Intervening Phrases and Clauses

One of the most frequent causes of subject-verb agreement errors is the presence of phrases or clauses that

come between the subject and the verb. These intervening elements can distract the writer, leading them to incorrectly match the verb with a noun within the phrase rather than the actual subject. For example, in the sentence, "The box of chocolates, which was a gift from my aunt, is on the table," the subject is "box" (singular), not "chocolates" (plural). Therefore, the singular verb "is" is correct. Always identify the true subject before selecting the verb.

Consider this example: "The students in the advanced literature class, who are dedicated to their studies, often find complex texts challenging." Here, the subject is "students" (plural), and the verb should agree with it. The phrase "in the advanced literature class" is a prepositional phrase and should be ignored when determining verb number. Similarly, relative clauses, such as "who are dedicated to their studies," modify the subject but do not change its number. The core subject remains "students," necessitating the plural verb "find."

Compound Subjects

Compound subjects, which consist of two or more nouns or pronouns joined by conjunctions, require careful attention to ensure correct verb agreement.

Subjects Joined by 'and'

When two or more subjects are joined by the conjunction "and," they are typically considered plural and require a plural verb. For instance, "The manager and the assistant are attending the conference." Here, "manager" and "assistant" are two separate entities, forming a plural subject that needs the plural verb "are attending."

However, there are exceptions. If the two nouns joined by "and" refer to a single person, idea, or thing, they are treated as a singular subject and require a singular verb. An example of this is: "Peanut butter and jelly is my favorite sandwich." In this case, "peanut butter and jelly" is understood as a single culinary unit. Another instance could be "The author and speaker of the lecture is well-known." Here, the same person holds both roles.

Subjects Joined by 'or' or 'nor'

When subjects are joined by "or" or "nor," the verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it. This is known as the "proximity rule." For example, "Neither the students nor the teacher understands the complex equation." In this sentence, "teacher" is singular and closer to the verb, so the singular verb "understands" is correct. If the order were reversed, "Neither the teacher nor the students understand the complex equation," the subject "students" is plural and closer to the verb, thus requiring the plural verb

"understand."

This rule also applies when one subject is singular and the other is plural. "Either the committee members or the chairperson is responsible for the decision." The singular subject "chairperson" is closer to the verb "is." Conversely, "Either the chairperson or the committee members are responsible for the decision." The plural subject "committee members" dictates the plural verb "are."

Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns, such as "everyone," "nobody," "each," "either," "neither," "anyone," "anybody," "someone," "somebody," "none," and "all," can often pose challenges. Most indefinite pronouns are singular and require singular verbs, even if they refer to a group of people or things.

For example, "Everyone is required to sign in." "Everyone" is an indefinite pronoun that is always treated as singular, hence the singular verb "is required." Similarly, "Each of the participants has a unique role." "Each" is singular, and so is the verb "has."

However, some indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural depending on the context. These include "all," "any," "most," "none," and "some." If these pronouns refer to a plural noun or a group, they take a plural verb. If they refer to a singular noun, they take a singular verb.

Consider these examples: "Some of the books are missing." Here, "books" is plural, so "Some" takes the plural verb "are missing." In contrast, "Some of the water has leaked." Here, "water" is uncountable and singular, so "Some" takes the singular verb "has leaked." "None of the students seem concerned." "Students" is plural, so "None" takes the plural verb "seem." "None of the advice was helpful." "Advice" is uncountable and singular, so "None" takes the singular verb "was helpful."

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns, such as "team," "committee," "family," "audience," "staff," and "government," can be treated as either singular or plural depending on whether they are acting as a single unit or as individual members. When the collective noun acts as a single unit, it takes a singular verb. When the members of the group are acting as individuals, the collective noun takes a plural verb.

For instance, "The team is celebrating its victory." Here, the "team" is acting as a single, unified entity, hence the singular verb "is celebrating." However, "The team are arguing about the strategy." In this case, the individual members of the team are engaged in a disagreement, making the noun plural, and thus requiring the plural verb "are arguing."

Another example: "The committee has reached a decision." (Acting as a unit). "The committee members have discussed the proposal individually." (Acting as individuals).

Subjects That Follow Verbs

In certain sentence structures, the subject may appear after the verb. This is particularly common in sentences that begin with "there" or "here," and in questions.

Sentences Beginning with 'There' or 'Here'

When a sentence begins with "there" or "here," the true subject follows the verb. Therefore, the verb must agree with the noun that comes after it. For example, "There is a book on the table." The subject is "book" (singular), so the singular verb "is" is correct. "There are several books on the table." The subject is "books" (plural), so the plural verb "are" is correct.

Similarly, "Here is the information you requested." The subject is "information" (singular), so the singular verb "is" is used. "Here are the documents that need your signature." The subject is "documents" (plural), so the plural verb "are" is used.

Questions

In questions, especially those that start with interrogative words like "who," "what," "where," "when," "why," and "how," or auxiliary verbs like "is," "are," "do," and "does," it's crucial to identify the subject correctly. For example, "Who is responsible for this error?" The subject is "who," which is acting singularly here, so the singular verb "is" is used. "Who are the members of the committee?" Here, "who" refers to multiple people, making it plural, hence the plural verb "are."

Consider another example: "What is the primary concern?" Subject: "What," acting singularly. Verb: "is." "What are the main concerns?" Subject: "What," acting plurally. Verb: "are."

Words That Appear Plural but Are Singular

Some nouns in English look plural because they end in "s" but are, in fact, singular in meaning. These include academic subjects like "mathematics," "physics," and "economics," as well as illnesses like "measles" and "mumps," and phrases that denote a single entity like "the United States." These words require singular verbs.

Examples include: "Mathematics is a challenging subject for many." The subject "Mathematics" is singular, so the verb "is" is correct. "The news is surprising." "News" is singular. "Measles is a contagious disease." "Measles" is singular.

This also applies to phrases that, though containing plural elements, refer to a single concept or quantity. For instance, "Five dollars is too much for this item." While "dollars" is plural, "five dollars" represents a single sum of money. "Ten years is a long time to wait." Similarly, "ten years" is treated as a single duration.

When the Subject is a Gerund or Infinitive

A gerund (a verb ending in "-ing" used as a noun) or an infinitive (the base form of a verb preceded by "to") acting as the subject of a sentence is always singular and requires a singular verb.

For example: "Swimming is excellent exercise." "Swimming" is a gerund acting as the subject, so the singular verb "is" is correct. "To err is human." "To err" is an infinitive acting as the subject, so the singular verb "is" is used.

Another example: "Reading novels helps to improve vocabulary." "Reading" is a gerund, taking the singular verb "helps." "To understand the rules requires careful attention." "To understand" is an infinitive, taking the singular verb "requires."

Titles of Books, Movies, and Organizations

Titles of books, movies, songs, works of art, and names of organizations are always treated as singular, even if the title itself contains a plural word. Therefore, they require singular verbs.

Examples: "The Great Gatsby is a classic novel." "The Great Gatsby" is a singular title. "The Avengers assembles a team of superheroes." "The Avengers" refers to a single film or group of characters, taking a singular verb. "Google provides a wide range of services." "Google" is the name of a singular organization.

Mastering Subject-Verb Agreement: Tips and Strategies

Consistent application of subject-verb agreement rules can be achieved through diligent practice and awareness. Here are some effective strategies to help you avoid common mistakes:

- **Identify the True Subject:** Always locate the main noun or pronoun that performs the action or is described by the verb. Ignore intervening phrases and clauses.
- **Mentally Remove Prepositional Phrases:** When in doubt, try reading the sentence without any prepositional phrases to see if the subject-verb agreement becomes clearer.
- **Know Your Indefinite Pronouns:** Memorize which indefinite pronouns are always singular, which are always plural, and which can be either, depending on the context.
- **Be Mindful of Collective Nouns:** Determine whether the collective noun is acting as a unit or as individual members, and adjust the verb accordingly.
- **Check Sentences with Inverted Order:** Pay special attention to sentences starting with "there" or "here," and questions, where the subject often follows the verb.
- **Read Your Work Aloud:** Often, errors in subject-verb agreement become more apparent when you hear the sentence spoken.
- **Practice Regularly:** The more you practice, the more natural subject-verb agreement will become. Use grammar exercises and pay close attention to feedback.
- **Consult a Style Guide or Grammar Resource:** Keep a reliable grammar reference handy for moments of uncertainty.

Conclusion: Achieving Grammatical Excellence

Mastering common subject-verb agreement issues is crucial for producing clear, professional, and credible writing. By understanding the core principle that subjects and verbs must agree in number, and by diligently applying the rules to tricky constructions like intervening phrases, compound subjects, indefinite pronouns, collective nouns, and inverted sentence structures, you can significantly improve your grammatical accuracy. Remember that careful identification of the subject is paramount, and consistent practice is the key to internalizing these rules. With a focus on these common pitfalls and the strategies provided, you can confidently write with precise subject-verb agreement, ensuring your message is communicated effectively and without grammatical distraction.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the most common subject-verb agreement error?

The most frequent mistake is failing to match a singular subject with a singular verb, especially when the subject is separated from the verb by a prepositional phrase or clause. For example, 'The box of apples are heavy' should be 'The box of apples is heavy'.

How do I handle compound subjects joined by 'and'?

When two or more subjects are joined by 'and,' they typically form a plural subject and require a plural verb. For instance, 'The dog and the cat are playing.'

What about compound subjects joined by 'or' or 'nor'?

When compound subjects are joined by 'or' or 'nor,' the verb agrees with the subject closer to it. For example, 'Neither the students nor the teacher is ready.' However, if one subject is singular and the other is plural, the plural subject should be closer to the verb. 'Neither the teacher nor the students are ready.'

How do indefinite pronouns affect subject-verb agreement?

Indefinite pronouns like 'everyone,' 'somebody,' 'nobody,' 'each,' 'either,' and 'neither' are generally singular and take singular verbs. For instance, 'Everyone is excited.'

What if an indefinite pronoun is plural?

Some indefinite pronouns, like 'both,' 'few,' 'many,' and 'several,' are always plural and take plural verbs. For example, 'Both are coming.'

How do I correctly use 'there is' and 'there are'?

The verb in 'there is' or 'there are' constructions agrees with the noun that follows. Use 'there is' with singular nouns ('There is a book on the table') and 'there are' with plural nouns ('There are books on the table').

What's the rule for collective nouns like 'team' or 'family'?

Collective nouns can be tricky. If the group is acting as a single unit, use a singular verb. If the members of the group are acting as individuals, use a plural verb. For example, 'The team is winning' (as a unit) versus 'The team are arguing among themselves' (as individuals).

How do phrases like 'as well as,' 'along with,' or 'in addition to' affect verb agreement?

These phrases act as parenthetical additions and do not make the subject plural. The verb should agree with

the main subject of the sentence. For instance, 'The manager, along with his employees, is attending the conference.'

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to common subject-verb agreement issues, each with a short description:

1.

The Singular Case of Plural Verbs

This book delves into the common pitfall of using singular verbs with plural subjects and vice versa. It explores tricky scenarios like compound subjects connected by "and" versus "or," as well as the impact of intervening phrases on agreement. Through clear examples and targeted exercises, readers will master the nuances of making subjects and verbs consistently agree.

2.

Collective Nouns: One or Many?

Unraveling the complexities of collective nouns is the focus of this guide. It addresses whether groups like "team," "family," or "committee" should take singular or plural verbs, depending on context and regional variations. The book provides practical strategies for analyzing collective noun usage and ensuring accurate verb agreement in various writing situations.

3.

Pronoun Agreement Puzzles Solved

This title tackles the often-confusing world of pronoun-antecedent agreement and its connection to subject-verb agreement. It explains how indefinite pronouns and gender-neutral language can create challenges for maintaining consistent agreement. The book offers a step-by-step approach to identifying and correcting errors, ensuring clarity and precision in writing.

4.

Subject-Verb Agreement in the Wild

Taking a practical, real-world approach, this book examines subject-verb agreement in everyday writing, from emails to blog posts. It highlights frequently encountered errors in informal and formal contexts and provides readily applicable solutions. The focus is on building confidence and developing an intuitive understanding of grammatical harmony.

5.

The Agreement Navigator: Compound Subjects and Seriatim

This comprehensive resource guides readers through the complexities of compound subjects, both coordinated and separated by correlative conjunctions. It also addresses the often-overlooked issue of agreement with subjects presented in a series. The book equips writers with the tools to navigate these intricate grammatical structures accurately.

6.

Verbs in the Shadow: Agreement with Modifiers and Clauses

This title specifically targets situations where modifying phrases or clauses obscure the true subject. It explains how to identify the core subject, even when it's separated from its verb by prepositional phrases, adjectives, or relative clauses. The book provides effective techniques for maintaining subject-verb agreement in more complex sentence constructions.

7.

Agreement for the Age of the Internet: Online Writing Challenges

Focused on the specific demands of digital communication, this book addresses subject-verb agreement in online writing. It examines how the fast-paced nature of the internet, including social media and forums, can lead to agreement errors. The guide offers practical advice for ensuring grammatical accuracy in a diverse range of online content.

8.

Demystifying Agreement: Indefinite Pronouns and Quantifiers

This book clarifies the often-misunderstood rules governing indefinite pronouns like "everyone," "nobody," and "some." It also tackles agreement issues with quantifiers and expressions of quantity. Through targeted explanations and practice, readers will master the correct verb usage with these frequently problematic word categories.

9.

The Editor's Eye: Mastering Subject-Verb Agreement

Designed for aspiring editors and meticulous writers, this title hones in on the critical skill of identifying and correcting subject-verb agreement errors. It provides a systematic approach to proofreading and editing, emphasizing common error patterns and how to spot them. The book empowers readers to achieve grammatical perfection in their own work and that of others.

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