

common subject verb agreement mistakes

Understanding and Avoiding Common Subject-Verb Agreement Mistakes

Subject-verb agreement is a fundamental aspect of English grammar that, when overlooked, can significantly detract from the clarity and professionalism of your writing. Many writers, from students to seasoned professionals, grapple with ensuring their verbs correctly match their subjects in number. This article delves into the most prevalent subject-verb agreement errors, offering clear explanations and practical strategies to help you master this crucial grammatical skill. We will explore how to identify and correct issues arising from compound subjects, indefinite pronouns, collective nouns, and tricky sentence structures, equipping you with the knowledge to write with confidence and precision. Understanding these common subject-verb agreement mistakes is essential for effective communication.

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Understanding the Basics of Subject-Verb Agreement

At its core, subject-verb agreement dictates that a verb must agree in number with its subject. This means that a singular subject requires a singular verb, and a plural subject requires a plural verb. For most nouns, adding an "-s" makes them plural. However, the verb conjugation is often more complex, especially in the present tense. For instance, the singular subject "he" takes the verb "runs," while the plural subject "they" takes the verb "run." Understanding this fundamental principle is the first step in avoiding common subject-verb agreement mistakes. Pay close attention to the singular and plural forms of verbs, particularly in the third person singular present tense where "-s" or "-es" is typically added.

Singular subjects include one person, place, or thing, or a pronoun like "he," "she," "it," or "I." Plural subjects refer to more than one person, place, or thing, or pronouns like "we," "you," or "they." The challenge often arises when the subject is not immediately apparent, or when it's modified by phrases or clauses that can obscure its number. Recognizing the true subject of a sentence is paramount to ensuring correct verb agreement, thereby preventing a common subject-verb agreement error.

Common Subject-Verb Agreement Mistakes and How to Fix Them

Numerous pitfalls exist in achieving perfect subject-verb agreement. These common subject-verb agreement mistakes often stem from complex sentence structures, the presence of intervening phrases, or the nature of the subject itself. By understanding the specific scenarios where these errors typically occur, writers can develop strategies to identify and rectify them, leading to more grammatically sound and polished writing. This section will highlight the most frequent offenders and provide actionable solutions.

Mistakes with Compound Subjects

Compound subjects are two or more subjects joined by a conjunction, and their agreement rules can be tricky. When subjects are joined by "and," they are usually plural and require a plural verb. For example, "John and Mary are going to the party." However, exceptions exist when the compound subject is treated as a single unit or idea. For instance, "Peanut butter and jelly is my favorite sandwich." Recognizing these nuances is key to avoiding common subject-verb agreement mistakes with compound subjects.

When 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 happy." If the subjects are of different numbers, the plural subject should be placed closer to the verb. "Neither the teacher nor the students are happy." Incorrect agreement here is a very common subject-verb agreement mistake.

Mistakes with Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns, such as "each," "every," "either," "neither," "one," "some," "all," "any," and "none," can be particularly troublesome. Many indefinite pronouns are always singular, regardless of the words that follow them. Examples of always singular indefinite pronouns include: "each," "either," "neither," "one," "everyone," "everybody," "everything," "someone," "somebody," "something," "anyone," "anybody," "anything," "no one," "nobody," and "nothing." These always take singular verbs. For instance, "Everyone is here." Failing to recognize this is a frequent subject-verb agreement mistake.

Other indefinite pronouns, like "some," "all," "any," "most," and "none," can be singular or plural depending on whether they refer to a singular or plural noun. If they refer to a singular noun, they take a singular verb. If they refer to a plural noun, they take a plural verb. For example, "Some of the cake is left" (referring to a singular amount of cake), but "Some of the students are absent" (referring to multiple students). This variability is a common source of subject-verb agreement errors.

Mistakes with Collective Nouns

Collective nouns, such as "team," "family," "committee," "group," "audience," and "government," can be tricky because they represent a group of individuals but are often treated as a singular unit. When the collective noun acts as a single entity, it takes a singular verb. For example, "The team is playing well." This is a common subject-verb agreement mistake when writers consider the individual members rather than the group as a whole.

However, when the members of the group are acting as individuals, the collective noun can take a plural verb. For instance, "The committee are arguing among themselves about the new proposal." The context is crucial here. If the group acts as one, use a singular verb; if the members act as individuals, use a plural verb. Misinterpreting this distinction leads to common subject-verb agreement mistakes.

Mistakes with Pronouns That Can Be Singular or Plural

Certain pronouns, like "you," "we," and "they," are always plural and require plural verbs. The pronoun "I" is always singular and takes a singular verb. The pronoun "you" can refer to one person or many, but it always takes a plural verb. For example, "You are a great student." A common subject-verb agreement mistake occurs when writers incorrectly apply singular verb forms to these pronouns.

Understanding the antecedent of relative pronouns like "who," "which," and "that" is also vital. The verb that follows these pronouns must agree with the noun or pronoun to which they refer. For example, "She is one of those people who are always late." Here, "who" refers to "people" (plural), so the verb is "are." If the sentence were "She is the only one of the students who is always late," then "who" refers to "one" (singular), and the verb is "is." This is another area where common subject-verb agreement mistakes can occur.

Mistakes with Subjects Preceded by Phrases

Phrases that come between the subject and the verb can often obscure the subject's number, leading to subject-verb agreement errors. Prepositional phrases, in particular, are notorious for causing this confusion. For example, in the sentence, "The box of chocolates is on the table," the subject is "box" (singular), not "chocolates" (plural). The prepositional phrase "of chocolates" does not affect the verb agreement.

Similarly, in sentences like, "The students in the advanced class are preparing for their final exams," the subject is "students" (plural), and the prepositional phrase "in the advanced class" does not change the verb. Always identify the true subject before determining the correct verb form to avoid this common subject-verb agreement mistake.

Mistakes with Intervening Phrases and Clauses

Intervening phrases and clauses function similarly to prepositional phrases in that they can separate the subject from its verb, causing confusion. These can include participial phrases, appositives, or relative clauses. For instance, "My brother, who lives in California, is visiting next week." The subject is "brother" (singular), and the relative clause "who lives in California" does not change this. The verb "is" correctly agrees with "brother." Failing to isolate the subject from these modifying elements is a frequent source of common subject-verb agreement mistakes.

Another example: "The results of the experiment, despite initial setbacks, were encouraging." The subject is "results" (plural), and the intervening phrases "of the experiment" and "despite initial setbacks" do not alter this. The plural verb "were" correctly agrees with "results." Accurate identification of the core subject is key.

Mistakes with Compound Subjects Joined by "Or" or "Nor"

As mentioned earlier, when compound subjects are joined by "or" or "nor," the verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it. This rule is often misapplied, leading to common subject-verb agreement mistakes. Consider these examples: "Neither the cats nor the dog seems interested in the new toy." Here, "dog" is singular and closest to the verb, so the singular verb "seems" is used. Conversely, "Neither the dog nor the cats seem interested in the new toy." Here, "cats" is plural and closest, so the plural verb "seem" is used.

When one subject is singular and the other is plural, place the plural subject closer to the verb to ensure agreement. This principle helps avoid common subject-verb agreement errors and creates a more natural flow. If both subjects are singular, use a singular verb. If both are plural, use a plural verb.

Mistakes with Subjects Following Verbs

In sentences where the subject follows the verb, particularly in questions or sentences beginning with "here" or "there," it's crucial to identify the subject correctly before choosing the verb. This structure can easily lead to common subject-verb agreement mistakes. For example, in the question, "Are there any cookies left?" the subject is "cookies" (plural), so the plural verb "are" is correct. If the question were, "Is there a cookie left?" the subject is "cookie" (singular), and the singular verb "is" is appropriate.

Sentences beginning with "here" or "there" also place the subject after the verb. "Here is the book you requested." The subject is "book" (singular), so "is" is correct. "Here are the books you requested." The subject is "books" (plural), so "are" is correct. This inversion is a common area for subject-verb agreement errors.

Mistakes with "There Is" and "There Are"

This is a specific instance of subjects following verbs and a frequent source of common subject-verb agreement mistakes. The words "there is" are used before a singular subject, and "there are" are used before a plural subject. For example, "There is a spider on the ceiling." The subject is "spider" (singular). "There are many spiders on the ceiling." The subject is "spiders" (plural).

The temptation to use "there is" universally can be strong, but it is grammatically incorrect when the subject is plural. Always look for the noun that follows "there is" or "there are" and ensure the verb agrees with its number. This diligent checking helps prevent common subject-verb agreement mistakes.

Mistakes with Titles of Books, Movies, and Other Works

Titles of books, movies, songs, and other creative works are treated as singular nouns, even if the title itself contains plural words. This is a straightforward rule, but failing to adhere to it results in common subject-verb agreement mistakes. For example, " 'The Lord of the Rings' is an epic fantasy series." The title "The Lord of the Rings" is a singular entity. Similarly, " 'Friends' was a popular sitcom." The title "Friends" is treated as a single unit.

Even if a title is plural in form, it still takes a singular verb because it refers to one work. For instance, " 'The Grapes of Wrath' tells the story of the Joad family." The title itself is singular. Mastering this rule is important for academic and professional writing to avoid common subject-verb agreement errors.

Mistakes with Words Ending in "-s" That Are Singular

Some words in English end in "-s" but are singular in meaning. These include subjects like "news," "mathematics," "physics," "economics," and names of countries or diseases that end in "-s," such as "The Philippines" or "measles." Using a plural verb with these words is a common subject-verb agreement mistake. For example, "The news is good today." The word "news" is singular, even though it ends in "s."

Similarly, "Mathematics requires logical thinking." The subject "mathematics" is singular. "The Philippines is an archipelago." The country's name, though ending in "s," is singular. Recognizing these exceptions is crucial to preventing common subject-verb agreement errors.

Mistakes with Fractions and Percentages

When dealing with fractions and percentages, the verb agreement depends on the noun that follows the fraction or percentage. If the noun is singular, the verb is singular. If the noun is plural, the verb is plural. This is a nuanced area where common subject-verb agreement mistakes often occur. For example, "One-third of the pie is missing." Here, "pie" is singular. "One-third of the pies are missing." Here, "pies" is plural.

The same principle applies to percentages. "Fifty percent of the voters support the candidate." "Voters" is plural. "Fifty percent of the funding goes to research." "Funding" is singular (an uncountable noun). When "percent" is used alone or refers to a singular entity, it takes a singular verb. However, "the voters" or "the apples" makes it plural. This careful consideration of the noun is vital to avoid common subject-verb agreement mistakes.

Strategies for Mastering Subject-Verb Agreement

Mastering subject-verb agreement involves developing a keen eye for sentence structure and a solid understanding of grammatical rules. Regular practice and a systematic approach can significantly improve your accuracy. By implementing specific strategies, you can proactively address potential issues and ensure your writing is grammatically sound. These strategies focus on identifying the core components of a sentence and applying the correct agreement principles.

One effective strategy is to always identify the true subject of the sentence first. Isolate the subject from any modifying phrases or clauses. Once the subject is clearly identified, determine its number (singular or plural). Then, select the verb form that matches that number. This simple, methodical approach can prevent many common subject-verb agreement mistakes.

Another strategy is to read your writing aloud. Often, grammatical errors, including subject-verb agreement issues, become more apparent when heard. Pay close attention to how the verb sounds with its subject. If it sounds awkward or incorrect, it's a strong indication that you may have a subject-verb

agreement mistake.

Practical Tips for Avoiding Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

Beyond understanding the rules, having practical habits can significantly reduce the occurrence of common subject-verb agreement mistakes. These tips are designed to be integrated into your writing process, making grammatical accuracy a natural outcome.

- **Proofread Carefully:** Always dedicate time to proofreading your work specifically for subject-verb agreement errors. Don't rely solely on spell-checkers, as they often miss these nuanced mistakes.
- **Underline Subjects and Circle Verbs:** During the editing process, try underlining your subjects and circling your verbs. This visual separation helps you focus on their relationship and check for agreement.
- **Consult a Grammar Guide:** Keep a reliable grammar guide or online resource handy. When in doubt about a particular sentence construction or word, refer to it for clarification.
- **Practice Regularly:** The more you write and actively check for subject-verb agreement, the better you will become. Seek out exercises or prompts to hone this skill.
- **Focus on Tricky Cases:** Pay extra attention to sentences with compound subjects, indefinite pronouns, collective nouns, and inverted sentence structures, as these are the most common culprits for subject-verb agreement mistakes.
- **Understand Pronoun Antecedents:** For relative pronouns like "who," "which," and "that," ensure the verb agrees with the word the pronoun refers to, not the pronoun itself.

By consistently applying these practical tips, you can build strong habits that minimize common subject-verb agreement mistakes and elevate the quality of your writing.

Conclusion

Mastering subject-verb agreement is a vital skill for any writer aiming for clarity, precision, and professionalism. We have explored the most common subject-verb agreement mistakes, from tricky compound subjects and indefinite pronouns to collective nouns and inverted sentence structures. By diligently identifying the true subject, understanding the nuances of pronoun usage, and paying close attention to words that appear plural but are singular, you can effectively avoid these pitfalls. Implementing strategies such as careful proofreading, reading aloud, and consulting grammar resources will further

solidify your grasp on this fundamental grammatical principle. Consistent practice and a mindful approach to sentence construction are your greatest allies in preventing common subject-verb agreement mistakes and ensuring your written communication is always accurate and impactful.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

The most frequent mistake involves compound subjects joined by 'and,' where people incorrectly use a singular verb when the subject is plural (e.g., 'John and Mary walks' instead of 'John and Mary walk').

How do I handle subjects joined by 'or' or 'nor'?

When subjects are joined by 'or' or 'nor,' the verb agrees with the subject closest to it. For instance, 'Either the dog or the cats are playing' is correct because 'cats' is plural and closer to the verb.

What about collective nouns like 'team' or 'family'?

Collective nouns can be tricky. If the group acts as a single unit, use a singular verb (e.g., 'The team wins'). If the members of the group act as individuals, use a plural verb (e.g., 'The team are arguing among themselves').

How do I deal with indefinite pronouns like 'everyone' or 'some'?

Singular indefinite pronouns (everyone, everybody, anyone, anybody, someone, somebody, no one, nobody, each, either, neither) always take singular verbs. Plural indefinite pronouns (several, few, both, many) take plural verbs. Pronouns like 'some,' 'all,' 'most,' 'any,' and 'none' can be singular or plural depending on what they refer to in the sentence.

What happens when the subject comes after the verb?

This often occurs in sentences starting with 'there is/are' or 'here is/are.' The verb must agree with the subject that follows. For example, 'There is a book on the table,' but 'There are books on the table.'

How do phrases between the subject and verb affect agreement?

Prepositional phrases or clauses that come between the subject and verb do not affect subject-verb agreement. You must identify the true subject and ensure the verb agrees with it. For instance, 'The box of chocolates is on the counter,' not 'The box of chocolates are on the counter.'

Additional Resources

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

1.

The Singular Singularities of Plural Pronouns

This guide delves into the often-confusing world of pronouns that, despite their appearance, often require singular verbs. It explores indefinite pronouns like "each" and "every," collective nouns, and tricky constructions that can trip up even experienced writers. Understanding these singular singularities is crucial for achieving grammatical accuracy and clarity.

2.

When "They" Becomes Singular: Navigating Modern Pronouns

This book addresses the evolving use of singular "they" and its impact on subject-verb agreement. It provides clear rules and practical examples for correctly pairing singular "they" with its corresponding verb, offering a modern approach to inclusive language. Learn how to confidently use singular "they" without sacrificing grammatical correctness.

3.

The Elusive Agreement: Compound Subjects and Conjunctions

This focused text tackles the complexities of compound subjects joined by various conjunctions like "and," "or," and "nor." It explains how different conjunctions dictate verb agreement, offering strategies for deciphering sentences with multiple subjects. Master this essential skill to avoid common errors in your writing.

4.

Appositives and Agreement: Separating the Subject from the Verb

This practical guide illuminates how appositives, phrases that rename nouns, can often distract from the true subject of a sentence. It provides clear rules and numerous examples demonstrating how to maintain correct subject-verb agreement even when surrounded by descriptive phrases. Learn to identify the core subject and ensure your verbs match.

5.

Phrases in the Way: Prepositional and Participial Predicaments

This book zeroes in on how prepositional and participial phrases, frequently placed between the subject and verb, can lead to agreement errors. It offers strategies for identifying the true subject and ignoring these intervening phrases to maintain proper verb conjugation. Conquer these common pitfalls

for more polished prose.

6.

The Collective Noun Conundrum: Agreement with Groups

This essential resource explores the nuances of collective nouns, such as "team," "family," and "committee," and their agreement with verbs. It details when these nouns take singular or plural verbs based on context and intended meaning. Gain a solid understanding of collective noun agreement for accurate and sophisticated writing.

7.

Interrogative Agreement: Questions and Their Subjects

This helpful book addresses the unique challenges of subject-verb agreement in interrogative sentences, or questions. It explains how question structure can sometimes obscure the subject, leading to agreement mistakes. Learn to correctly identify the subject in inverted sentences and ensure your verbs are in harmony.

8.

"There is" vs. "There are": Mastering Existential Agreement

This dedicated guide tackles the common errors associated with "there is" and "there are" constructions. It clearly explains the rule of agreement, where the verb matches the noun that follows it. Through examples and exercises, readers will master this fundamental aspect of English grammar.

9.

Agreement in Complex Sentences: Clauses and Subordination

This advanced text delves into subject-verb agreement within complex sentences, particularly those involving dependent clauses and subordination. It provides strategies for identifying the main subject and verb, even when multiple clauses are present. Elevate your writing by mastering agreement in the most intricate sentence structures.

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