

SUBJECT AND VERB AGREEMENT

Subjects must agree with verbs in number and person. Beginning a sentence with *He don't* damages a speaker's credibility and limits a communicator's effectiveness. If an error is made in subject-verb agreement, it can generally be attributed to one of three lapses: (a) failure to locate the subject, (2) failure to recognize the number (singular or plural) of the subject after locating it, or (c) failure to recognize the number of the verb. Suggestions for locating the true subject and determining the number of the subject and its verb follow.

Locating Subjects

All verbs have subjects. Locating these subjects can be difficult, particularly when (a) a prepositional phrase comes between the verb and its subject, (b) an intervening element separates the subject and verb, (c) sentences begin with *there* or *here*, and (d) sentences are inverted.

Prepositional Phrases.

Subjects of verbs are not found in prepositional phrases. Therefore, you must learn to ignore such phrases in identifying subjects and verbs. Some of the most common prepositions are *of*, *to*, *in*, *from*, *for*, *with*, *at*, and *by*. Notice in these sentences that the italicized prepositional phrases do not contain the subjects of the verbs.

- Only one *of their new cars* is fully insured.
- It appears that the invoice *for the two shipments* was lost.
- The online version *of the magazine's college rankings* is available at its Web site.

Some of the less easily recognized prepositions are *except*, *but*, *like*, and *between*. In some of the following sentences, distinguish the subjects from the italicized prepositional phrases.

- All employees *but Daryl* are to report early.
- Everyone *except the Harrises* is able to attend.

Intervening Elements

Groups of words introduced by *as well as*, *in addition to*, *such as*, *including*, *together with*, *plus*, and *other than* do not contain sentence subjects.

- The priceless book, *as well as other valuable documents*, was lost in the fire.

In this sentence, the writer has elected to emphasize the subject *book* and to de-emphasize *other valuable documents*. The writer could have given equal weight to these elements by writing *The priceless book and other valuable documents were lost in the fire*. Notice that the number (singular or plural) of the verb changes when both *book* and *documents* are given equal emphasis.

- Our president, *together with her entire staff of employees*, sends her greets.
- Other students *such as Kyle* have completed the assignment.
- A brochure *plus three important documents* is included in this folder.

The Adverbs *There* and *Here*

In sentences beginning with *there* or *here*, look for the true subject *after* the verb. As adverbs, *here* and *there* cannot function as subjects.

- There are four candidates who applied for the position.
- Here is the fuel oil consumption report.

Inverted Sentence Order

Look for the subject after the verb in inverted sentences and in questions.

- Attending the conference are vendors from 38 states.
- Have the product specifications been submitted?
- How important are salary, benefits, and job security?
- How do law and ethics relate to everyday business?

Subjects Joined by *And*

When one subject is joined by another by the word *and*, the subject is plural and requires a plural verb.

- Some writers think that grammar and punctuation don't matter.
- The proposed law and its amendment are before the legislature.

Company Names and Titles

Even though they may appear to be plural, company names and titles of publications are singular; therefore, they require singular verbs.

- *Country Homes and Gardens* makes an excellent magazine gift.
- American Airlines is advertising the lowest fare to Hawaii.
- Richards, Batemen, and Richards, Inc., is offering the bond issue.

Subjects Joined by *Or* or *Nor*

When two or more subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb should agree with the closer subject.

- Neither the webmaster nor the clerks know the customer's password.
- Either Leslie or you are in charge of ordering supplies.
- The manufacturer or the distributors carry spare parts.

Indefinite Pronouns as Subjects

Some indefinite pronouns are always singular, while other indefinite pronouns are always plural. In addition, some may be singular or plural depending on the words to which they refer.

	Always Singular		Always Plural	Singular or Plural
anyone	every	nobody	both	all
anybody	everyone	nothing	few	more
anything	everybody	someone	many	most
each	everything	somebody	several	some
either	many a	something		any
	neither			none

- Either of the two applicants is qualified.
- Everybody in the large group of candidates has an equal chance.
- A few of the employees are eligible for bonuses.
- Neither of the Web sites is particularly helpful.

Indefinite pronouns such as *all*, *more*, and *most* provide one of the few instances in which prepositional phrases become important in determining agreement. Although the prepositional phrase does not contain the subject of the sentence, it does contain the noun to which the indefinite pronoun refers.

- Most of the applicants are women.
- Most of the work is completed.

If the indefinite pronouns *each*, *every*, or *many a* are used to describe two or more subjects joined by *and*, the subjects are considered separate. Therefore, the verb is singular.

- Many a semicolon and colon is misused.
- Every man, woman, and child is affected by the tax cut.

The indefinite pronouns *anyone*, *everyone*, and *someone* are generally spelled as two words when followed by *of* phrases.

- Any one of the police officers may be singled out for commendation.
- Every one of the candidates was questioned about campaign contributions.

Collective Nouns as Subjects

Words such as *faculty*, *committee*, and *council* may be singular or plural depending on their mode of operation. When a collective noun operates as a single unit, its verb should be singular. When the elements of a collective noun operate separately, the verb should be plural.

- Our faculty has approved the proposal.
- The council were sharply divided over the budget.

The Distinction Between *The Number* and *A Number*

When the word *number* is the subject of the sentence, its article (*the* or *a*) becomes significant. *The* is specific and therefore implies *singularity*; *a* is general and therefore implies *plurality*.

- The number of managers is declining.
- A number of email messages were lost.

Quantities, Measures

When we refer to *total* amounts, quantities and measures are singular. If they refer to individual units that can be counted, quantities and measures are plural.

- Three years is the period of the loan.
- Three years are needed to renovate the property total.

Fractions, Portions

Fractions and portions may be singular or plural depending on the nouns to which they refer.

- Only a third of the students' reading scores are satisfactory.
- Over half of the contract was ratified.
- A majority of employees agree with the proposal.
- A minimum of work is required to receive approval.
- Part of the delegates are in favor of the plan.
- Part of the proposal is ambiguous.

Who Clauses

Verbs in *who* clauses must agree in number and person with the nouns to which they refer. In *who* clauses introduced by *one of*, the verb is usually plural because it refers to a plural antecedent. In *who* clauses introduced by *the only one of*, the verb is singular.

- Tyler is one of those people who are late sleepers.
- Betty Pearman is one of those managers who always get excellent results from their employees.
- Maria is only one of the girls who is prepared.

Verbs must agree in person with the nouns or pronouns to which they refer.

- It is you who are responsible for security.
- Could it be I who am to blame?

Phrases and Clauses as Subjects

Use a singular verb when the subject of a sentence is a phrase or clause.

- Knowing automotive design and construction is unnecessary for the typical driver.
- That verbs must agree with subjects is accepted.

Exercises

Directions: Select the correct word to complete each sentence below.

1. Everyone except the president and other management members (is, are) eligible for the special retirement program.
2. One computer in our department, along with several on the second and third floors, (has, have) no antivirus program.
3. (Has, Have) any of the job candidate been interviewed?
4. One of the biggest headaches for employers (is, are) dealing with interpersonal relations among employees.
5. No one but the Human Resources director and a few managers ever (talk, talks) about balancing work and family issues.
6. The computer and the monitor, along with the printer, (cost, costs) less than we expected.
7. Addressing the conference (is, are) members of our management team.
8. We understand that American airlines (is, are) interviewing flight attendants.
9. A set of guidelines to standardize input and output (was, were) developed.
10. *Workplace Communication Strategies* by Eleanor M. Yueda (appear, appears) to be our departmental selection.
11. A task force of four men and five women (is, are) to be appointed.
12. Either Rhonda Behrens or Rona Lee (has, have) already approved the report.
13. Every man, woman, and child in the country (is, are) to be counted.

14. Each of the classifications (contains, contain) four parts.
15. All union members (has, have) to vote on the proposed contract.
16. Every one of the new dot-com companies (is, are) seeking venture capital.
17. Many a clerk and receptionist (has, have) complained about the switchboard.
18. (Everyone, Every one) of the wills can be produced on word processing equipment.
19. All that work (is, are) yet to be logged in.
20. Each clerk, administrative assistant, and word processing specialist (was, were) asked to complete a questionnaire.
21. The number of online job applications (is are) greater than expected.
22. Part of the loss of customers (is, are) the result of poor service.
23. Our company president is one of those executives who (is, are) able to delegate responsibility.
24. Fifteen feet of pipe (is, are) exactly what was specified.
25. Didn't you know it is you who (is, are) to be honored at the ceremony.
26. A number of problems (is, are) yet to be resolved.
27. She is the only one of the service reps who (speak, speaks) three languages.
28. Whoever is named for the job (has, have) my approval.
29. About one third of the records (is, are) stored on microfiche.
30. The hardest part of the job (is, are) the bending and lifting.