

Revising: Eleven Trouble Spots in Subject-Verb Agreement

Many people are uncomfortable with grammar because they've been frustrated by it in the past, and not without good reason, too, given the number of rules, their complexity, and all the terminology necessary even to understand them. To complicate, there are probably more exceptions to rules than there are rules. Comfort with the rules of grammar will make you a more fluent, confident writer, however. If reading a rule doesn't help you understand it, remember it, or figure out when it applies, you may find it more useful to study the example and come up with your own guidelines. Try it!

- Verbs always agree with their subjects, even when the subjects are far away.

The second entry in this long list of books and articles interests me most.

Alert: Expressions like *as well as*, *in addition to*, *accompanied by*, *together with*, and *along with* do not affect subject-verb agreement.

This book, together with the related articles, clarifies the situation for me.

- Compound subjects (two subjects connected with *and*) take plural agreement.

Professor Meyers and her assistant have completed their groundbreaking work.

- Lists preceded by *each* and *every* take singular verbs.

Every novel, play, and poem I read motivates me to become an English major.

However, lists followed by *each* take plural verbs.

A novel, a play, and a poem each manifest a different use of language.

- Verbs agreeing with compound *either...or/neither...nor* expressions agree with the element closest to them.

Neither the book nor the journal articles help in understanding the Asian monetary crisis. (*help* agrees with *articles*, the closest element)

Tip: If one element is singular and one is plural, placing the plural second (closer to the verb) makes the sentence more idiomatic.

- Indefinite pronouns almost always take a singular verb.

Examples of indefinite pronouns:

anybody either neither

somebody	anyone	everybody
nobody	someone	anything
everyone	none	something
each	everything	no one

Everybody agrees that Tibet has undergone profound changes in recent history.

- Collective nouns (nouns with a singular form referring to a group) take a singular verb.

The audience applauds on cue

To emphasize each individual in the collective, the collective nouns can take a plural verb.

The audience were already pushing and shoving past each other when the curtain dropped.

Alert: The expression *the number* takes a singular verb, while *a number* takes a plural one.

The number of women with PhDs in computer science is small.

Consequently, a number of scholars are advocating for educational reform.

Units of measurement take a singular verb when they refer to a collective entity and a plural one when they refer to individuals.

A quarter of the gas condenses within 15 seconds.

A quarter of the tests reveal nothing that we don't already know..

- Verbs agree with their subjects even when the subjects are placed out of order for stylistic effects.

There are seven tests in the procedure.

(*seven tests* is the real subject)

- Verbs never agree with their subject complements (the object-like expressions following the verb *to be*), even though you may feel a tendency to make them do so.

Drafting and revising are the best way to improve one's writing.>

- *Who*, *which*, and *that* agree with the nouns to which they refer.

Support your local food co-op, which is worker-owned.

(*which* refers to *co-op*, which is singular, so the verb is singular)

- Some words have plural forms (e.g. the disciplines as bodies of knowledge: economics, physics; or diseases: mumps, measles), but take singular agreement.

Statistics belongs in a college's basic curriculum.

However, when these words refer to single items, they take plural agreement.

Regarding teenage pregnancy, the statistics astound me.

- The titles of works and words written as words take a singular verb.

In conclusion, *Sons and Lovers* deserves a very high place in the literary canon.
Bats is the plural of *bat*.

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