

BASIC GRAMMAR
SESSION 12 SUBJECT-
VERB AGREEMENT

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Usage - Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must AGREE with one another in number (singular or plural). Thus, if a subject is singular, its verb must also be singular; if a subject is plural, its verb must also be plural.

In present tenses, nouns and verbs form plurals in opposite ways:

nouns ADD an s to the singular form,

BUT

verbs REMOVE an s from the singular form.

Here are nine subject-verb agreement rules.

1. A phrase or clause between subject and verb does not change the number of the subject.

Examples:

2. Indefinite pronouns as subjects

Singular indefinite pronoun subjects take singular verbs.

Plural indefinite pronoun subjects take plural verbs.

PLURAL: several, few, both, many

Some indefinite pronouns may be either singular or plural: with uncountable, use singular; with countable, use plural.

EITHER SINGULAR OR PLURAL: some, any, none, all, most

Sugar is uncountable; therefore, the sentence has a singular verb.

Marbles are countable; therefore, the sentence has a plural verb.

3. Compound subjects joined by and are always plural.

4. With compound subjects joined by or/nor, the verb agrees with the subject nearer to it.

In the above example, the plural verb are agrees with the nearer subject actors.

In this example, the singular verb is agrees with the nearer subject director.

5. Inverted Subjects must agree with the verb.

6. Collective Nouns (group, jury, crowd, team, etc.) may be singular or plural, depending on meaning.

In this example, the jury is acting as one unit; therefore, the verb is singular.

In this example, the jury members are acting as twelve individuals; therefore, the verb is plural.

7. Titles of single entities (books, organizations, countries, etc.) are always singular.

8. Plural form subjects

Plural form subjects with a singular meaning take a singular verb. (e.g. news, measles, mumps, physics, etc.)

Plural form subjects with singular or plural meaning take a singular or plural verb, depending on meaning. (e.g. politics, economics, etc.)

In this example, politics is a single topic; therefore, the sentence has a singular verb.

In this example, politics refers to the many aspects of the situation; therefore, the sentence has a plural verb.

Plural form subjects with a plural meaning take a plural verb. (e.g. scissors, trousers)

Note: In this example, the subject of the sentence is pair; therefore, the verb must agree with it. (Because scissors is the object of the preposition, scissors does not affect the number of the verb.)

9. With subject and subjective complement of different number, the verb always agrees with the subject.

10-A. With one of those _____ who, use a plural verb.

The above example implies that others besides Hannah like to read comic books. Therefore, the plural verb is the correct form to use.

10-B. With the only one of those _____ who, use a singular verb.

The above example implies that no one else except for Hannah likes to read comic books. Therefore, the singular verb is the correct for to use.

11-A. With the number of _____, use a singular verb.

11-B. With a number of _____, use a plural verb.

12. With every _____ and many a _____, use a singular verb.

Self Teaching Unit:

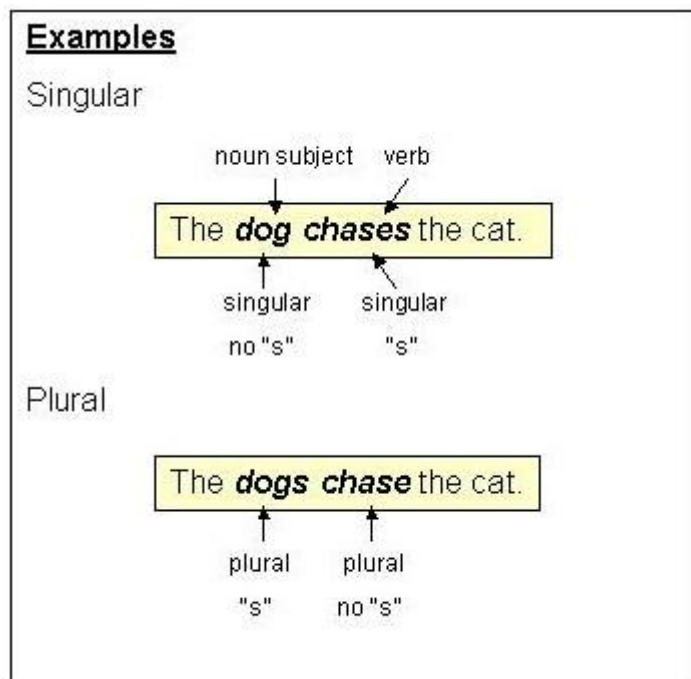
Subject - Verb Agreement

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Although you are probably already familiar with basic subject-verb agreement, this chapter begins with a quick review of basic agreement rules.

Subjects and **verbs** must AGREE with one another in **number** (singular or plural). Thus, if a subject is singular, its verb must also be singular; if a subject is plural, its verb must also be plural.

In the present tense, nouns and verbs form plurals in opposite ways: **nouns** ADD an **s** to the singular form; **verbs** REMOVE the **s** from the singular form.



These agreement rules do not apply to verbs used in the simple past tense without any helping verbs.

Examples

The **girl talked** to me.

singular

The **girls talked** to me.

plural

The agreement rules do, however, apply to the following helping verbs when they are used with a main verb: *is-are*, *was-were*, *has-have*, *does-do*.

Examples

Single helping verb:

The **girl has talked** to me.

singular singular
no "s" "s"

The **girls have talked** to me.

plural plural
"s" no "s"

First helping verb in pair of helping verbs:

The **girl has been talking** to me.

singular singular
no "s" "s"

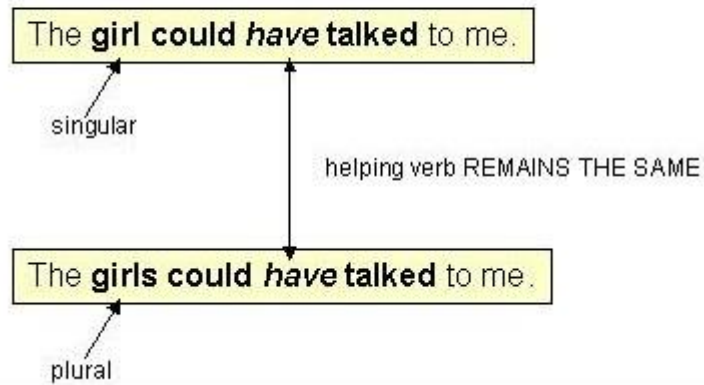
The **girls have been talking** to me.

plural plural
"s" no "s"

The agreement rules do not apply to **has-have** when used as the **SECOND** helping verb in a pair.

Example

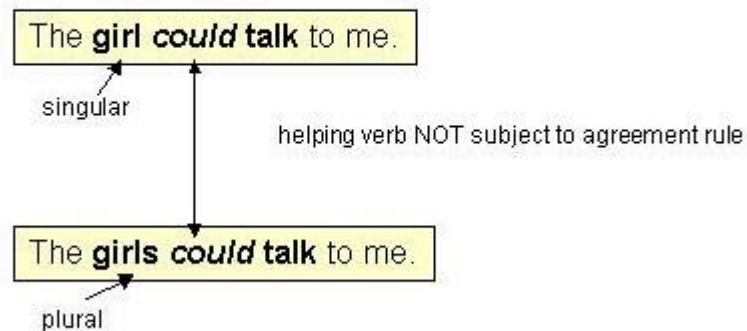
Second helping verb in pair:



They do NOT apply to any other helping verbs, such as *can, could, shall, should, may, might, will, would, must*.

Example:

Other helping verbs:



The subject-verb agreement rules apply to all personal pronouns except *I* and *you*, which, although SINGULAR, require PLURAL forms of verbs.

Examples



Now click on the link below to do exercise 1.

[Link to Exercise 1](#)

The remainder of this teaching unit deals with some more advanced subject-verb agreement rules and with exceptions to the original subject-verb agreement rule

Compound Subject

The word “compound” means “made up of two or more parts.” Two or more words can be compounded or linked by joining them with any of three words:

and, or, and nor

Here are some examples of compounding:

apples	oranges	
apples	and oranges	
dog	cat	bird
dog, cat,	or bird	

Compound nouns can function as a “compound subject.” In some instances, a compound subject poses special problems for the subject-verb agreement rule (+s, -s).

Examples

The ranger sees a bear.	The camper sees a bear.
ranger = singular noun (no "s") sees = singular verb ("s")	camper = singular noun (no "s") sees = singular verb ("s")

However, instead of using two sentences (as above), we may choose to give the above information in one sentence.

Example

The ranger **and** the camper see the bear.

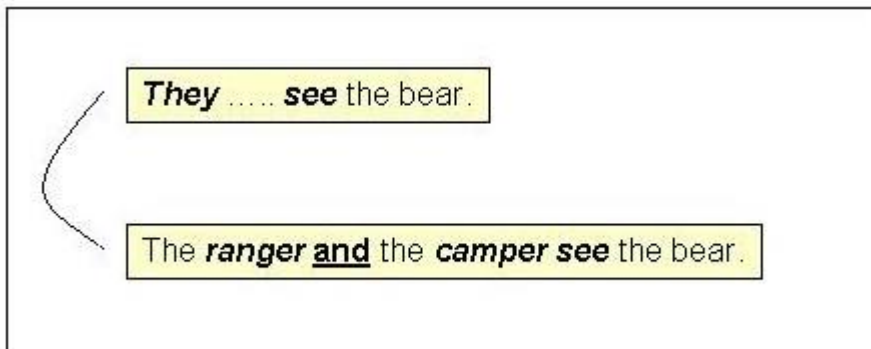
↓ ↓ ↑
plural plural

This sentence makes use of a **compound subject** (two subject nouns joined by **and**), illustrating a new rule about subject-verb agreement.

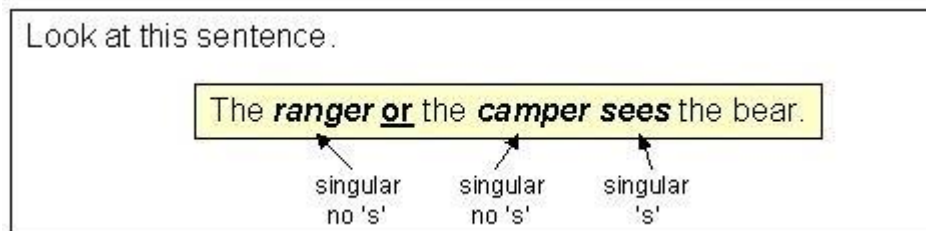
Although each part of the compound subject is singular (**ranger** and **camper**), taken together (joined by **and**), each one becomes a part of a plural structure and, therefore, must take a **plural** verb (**see**) to agree in the sentence.

SUBJECT-VERB RULE #1 – Two or more singular (or plural) subjects joined by **and** act as a **plural compound subject** and take a **plural verb** (singular + singular = plural).

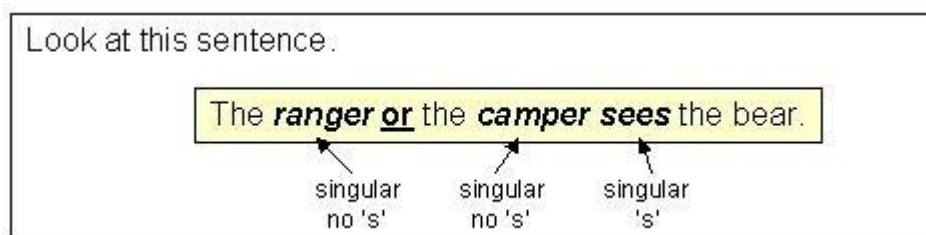
You can check the verb by substituting the pronoun **they** for the compound subject.



Or and **nor** as joiners work somewhat differently from **and**. While the word **and** seems to ADD things together, **or** and **nor** do not. They suggest a CHOICE.



Look at this sentence.

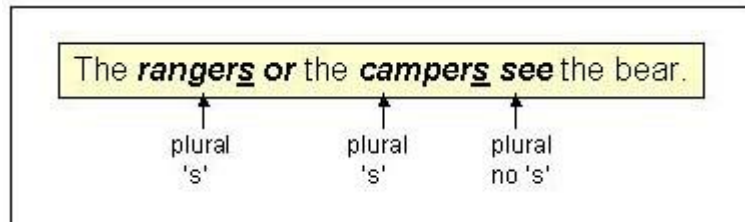


This sentence makes use of a **compound subject** (two subject nouns joined together by *or*). Each part of the compound subject (*ranger*, *camper*) is singular. Even though both words function together as subject (joined by *or*), the subject still remains SINGULAR (*ranger or camper*) since a CHOICE is implied.

This **compound subject**, therefore, requires a **singular** verb to agree with it.

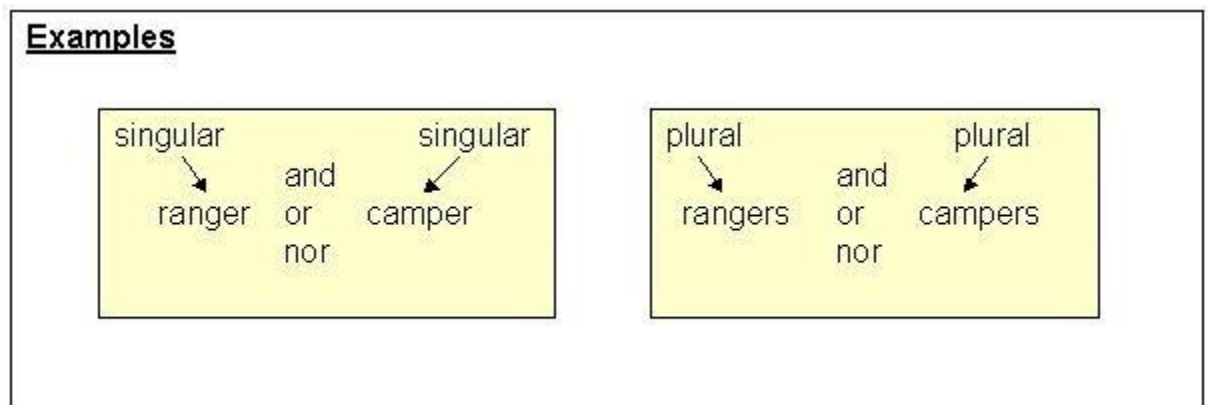
SUBJECT-VERB RULE #2 – Two or more SINGULAR subjects joined by **or** (or **nor**) act as a **singular compound subject** and, therefore, take a **singular verb** to agree.

Note: Two or more **plural** subjects joined by **or** (or **nor**) would naturally take a **plural** verb to agree.



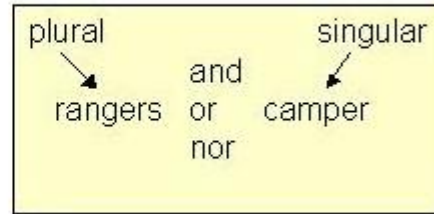
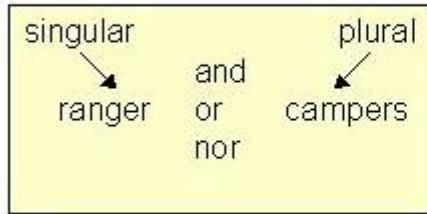
However, **or** and **nor** can pose a more difficult problem.

Thus far we have been working with compound subjects whose individual parts are **both** either singular or plural



What if one part of the compound subject is singular and the other part is plural?

Examples



What form of a verb should be used in this case? Should the verb be singular to agree with one word? Or should the verb be plural to agree with the other?

Solution:

1. If the individual parts of the compound subject are joined by **and**, always use a **plural** verb.

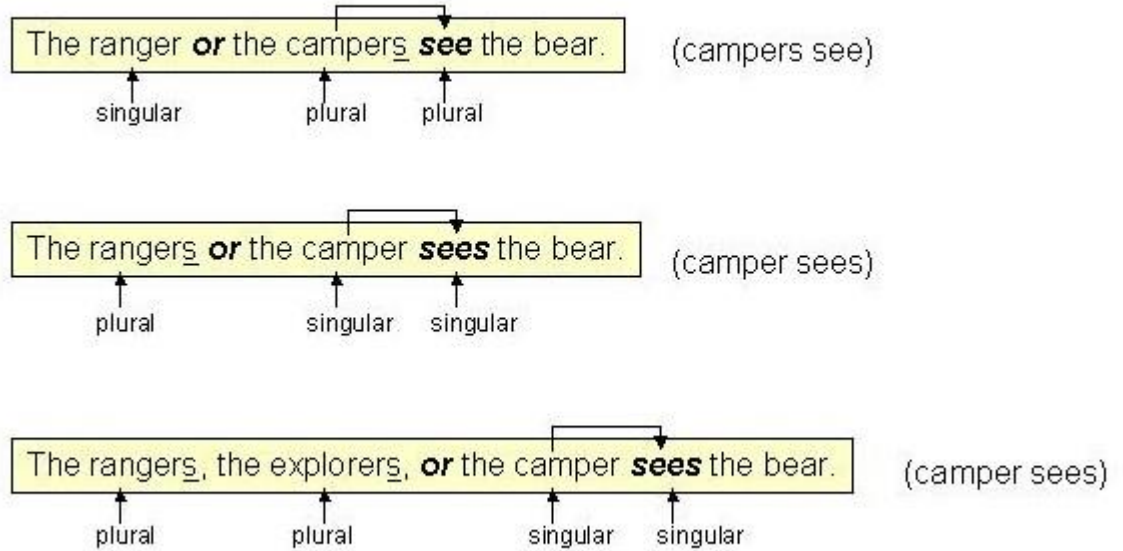
Example:

The ranger **and** the campers see the bear.

The rangers and the camper **see** the bear.

2. If the individual parts of the compound subject are joined by **or** or **nor**, use the verb form (singular or plural) which will agree with the **subject closer to the verb**.

Examples



Now click on the link below to do exercise 2.

[Link to Exercise 2](#)

Group Nouns

Some nouns which name groups can be either singular or plural depending upon their meaning in individual sentences.

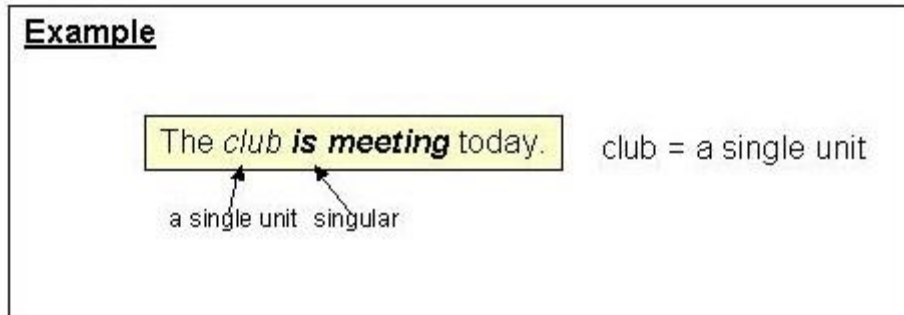
Examples

club	company	government	family
jury	team	army	group

Because they can describe either the individuals in the group (more than one – plural), or the group as a single entity (one only – singular), these nouns pose special problems.

However, there are some guidelines for deciding which verb form (singular or plural) to use with one of these nouns as the subject in a sentence.

If we refer to the group as a **whole** and, therefore, as a **single unit**, we consider the noun **singular**. In this case, we use a singular verb.



If, on the other hand, we are actually referring to the **individuals** within the group, then we consider the noun **plural**. In this case, we use a plural verb.



Of course group nouns, like other nouns, can also appear in plural forms (with an **s**).

Examples

clubs	companies	governments	families
juries	teams	armies	groups

When used in the **plural** form, group nouns mean MORE THAN ONE GROUP. Thus, it uses a plural verb.

Examples

The *clubs* **are having** a meeting today.

more than
one group

plural

Thus, there are three important subject – verb agreement rules to remember when a group noun is used as the subject:

1. Group nouns can be considered as a **single unit**, and, thus, take a **singular** verb.
2. Group nouns can be considered as **individual members** within a single unit and, thus, take a **plural** verb.
3. Group nouns can be given plural forms to mean **two or more units** and, thus, take a **plural** verb.

Now click on the link below to do exercise 3.

[Link to Exercise 3](#)

Plural Form / Singular Meaning Nouns

Some nouns are regularly **plural** in form, but singular in meaning.

Examples

news

measles

mumps

Even though these nouns APPEAR to be plural because they end in **s**, they actually refer to only **one** thing made up of smaller, uncounted parts. Therefore, they are considered **singular**.

Examples

The **news looks** good today.

↑ plural form ↑ singular form
singular meaning 's'

Generally **measles lasts** about two weeks.

↑ plural form ↑ singular form
singular meaning 's'

You can see that substituting that pronoun **it** instead of **they** makes more sense here.

Another group of plural form nouns end in **-ics**.

Examples

mathematics politics athletics economics

Similarly, **it** is a more suitable substitute for any of these words than is **they**.

These nouns appear to be plural (end in **s**), but generally refer to only **one** thing and are, therefore, generally considered **singular**.

Examples

Mathematics is my favorite subject.

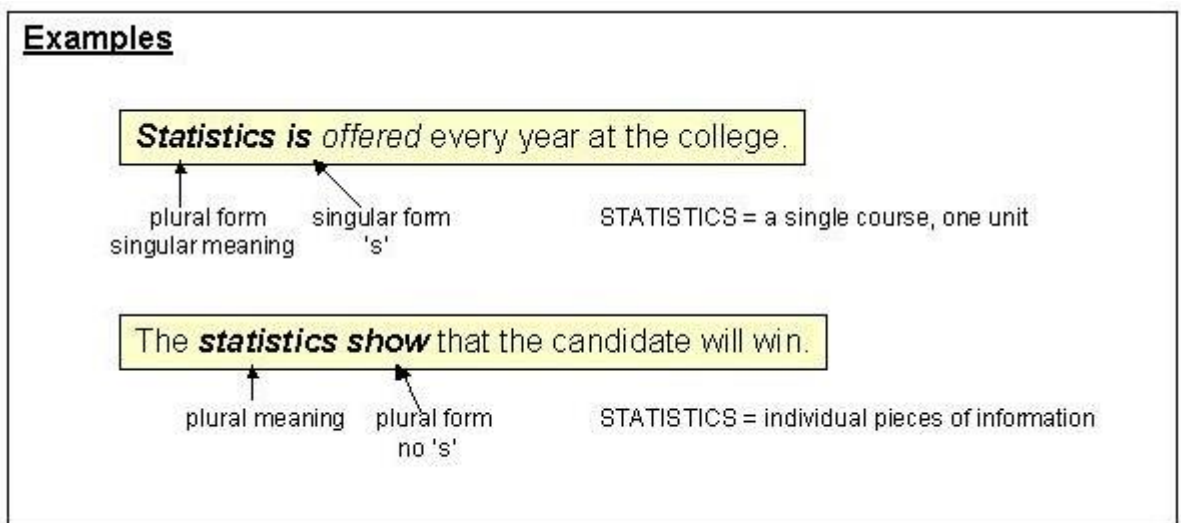
↑ plural form ↑ singular form
singular meaning 's'

Politics has made people do strange things.

↑ plural form ↑ singular form
singular meaning 's'

NOTE: Occasionally, however, the **-ics** nouns can have a **plural** meaning: We can speak about individual parts of these wholes. In this case, we apply the same rule as applies to group nouns when we consider the individual members within the group (see Section 3.3): We use a **plural verb**.

Note the difference in meaning and, therefore, in the verb chosen (singular or plural) between the two uses of the **-ics** noun, **statistics**.



Now click on the link below to do exercise 4.

[Link to Exercise 4](#)

Indefinite pronouns can pose special problems in subject – verb agreement.

The difficulty is that some indefinite pronouns sound **plural** when they are really **singular**.

As subjects, the following indefinite pronouns ALWAYS take **singular verbs**. Look at them closely.

either	anybody	somebody	everybody	nobody	each
neither	anyone	someone	everyone	no one	one
other	anything	something	everything	nothing	

These should be easy to remember.

Examples

Each sees the value of the course.
↑ ↑
singular singular
 's'

Everybody has gone to the movies.
↑ ↑
singular singular
 's'

Nothing seems right around this house anymore!
↑ ↑
singular singular
 's'

Another is on the way.
↑ ↑
singular singular
 's'

However, the following indefinite pronouns ALWAYS take **plural verbs**.

both few many several others

Examples

Many *have* answered the invitation for Friday evening.

↑ plural ↑ plural
 no 's'

A **few** *are* not coming at all.

↑ plural ↑ plural
 no 's'

Several *indicate* that they will be late.

↑ plural ↑ plural
 no 's'

EXCEPTIONS:

A third group of indefinite pronouns takes **either** a singular or plural verb depending on the pronoun's meaning in the sentence. Look at them closely.

some any none all most

("SANAM")

Examples

Some of the debt *has* been paid off.

↑ singular ↑ singular

Some refers to **debt**.
Therefore, **some** is singular
and takes a singular verb.

Some of the debts *are* still outstanding.

↑ plural ↑ plural

Here, **some** refers to **debts**.
Therefore, **some** is plural
and takes a plural verb.

Now click on the link below to do exercise 5.

[Link to Exercise 5](#)

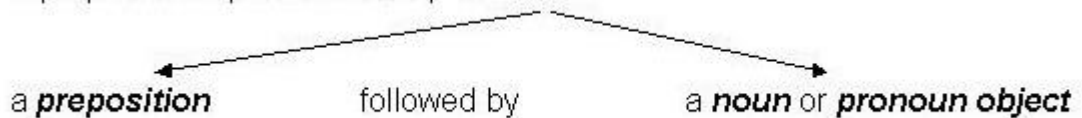
So far we have considered subjects that can cause subject-verb agreement confusion: **compound** subjects, **group noun** subjects, **plural form – singular meaning** subjects, and **indefinite** subjects.

The remainder of this teaching unit examines subject – verb agreement problems that can result from **word placement** in sentences. There are four main problems: prepositional phrases, clauses beginning with **who**, **that**, or **which**, sentences beginning with **here** or **there**, and questions.

Prepositional Phrase

A prepositional phrase sometimes complicates subject – verb agreement.

A prepositional phrase is composed of:



Examples of Prepositional Phrases

preposition modifier noun

of the car

preposition modifier noun

at the brown house

preposition pronoun object

about him

preposition modifiers noun objects

over that last big hill

preposition modifiers pronoun object

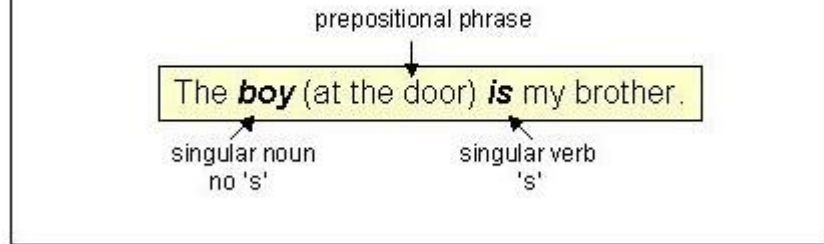
to a sweet someone

Here is a list of frequently used prepositions:

to	for	without	over	along
in	from	after	except	across
into	on	about	until	down
at	upon	above	between	through
by	with	under	behind	of

A prepositional phrase may be placed between the subject and verb.

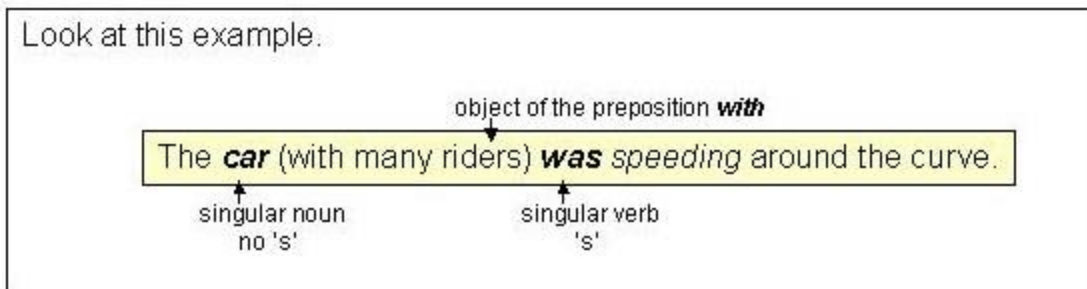
Example



In the above example, the singular verb **is** agrees with the singular subject **boy**.

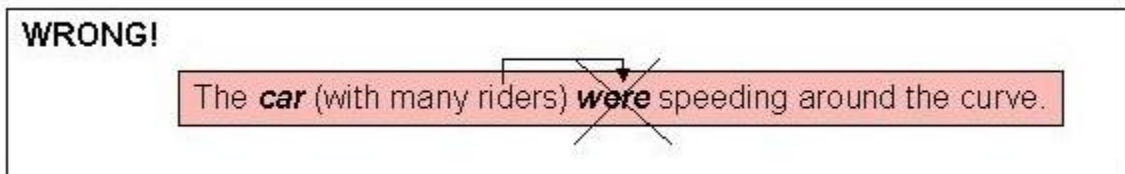
Sometimes, however, a prepositional phrase inserted between the subject and verb makes agreement more difficult.

Look at this example:



Car is the singular subject. **Was** is the singular helping verb which agrees with **car**. If we aren't careful, however, we may mistakenly label **riders** as the subject since it is nearer to the verb than **car** is. If we choose the plural noun, **riders**, we will incorrectly select the plural verb **were**.

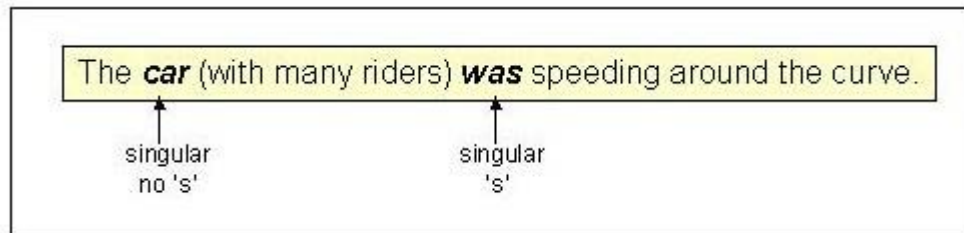
WRONG!



Solution to the Prepositional Phrase Problem

1. Learn the major prepositions (see page 28).

2. Be alert for prepositional phrases placed between the subject and verb, and identify the noun in the phrase immediately as the **object of a preposition**: An object of a preposition can NEVER be a **sentence subject**.
3. Locate the true sentence **subject** and choose a verb which agrees with it.



4. Remember the indefinite pronoun EXCEPTIONS considered in Section 3.5, p.18: **Some, Any, None, All, and Most**. The number of these subject words IS affected by a prepositional phrase between the subject and verb.

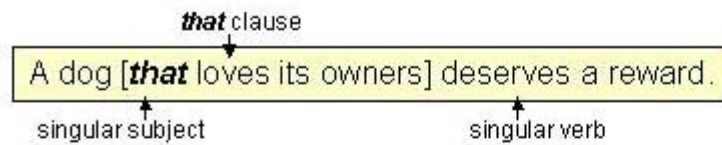
Now click on the link below to do exercise 6.

[Link to Exercise 6](#)

A clause beginning with **who, that, or which** and coming BETWEEN the subject and verb can cause agreement problems.

Like the prepositional phrase, the **who / that / which** clause never contains the subject.

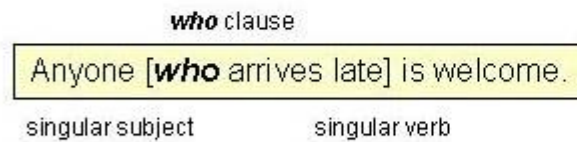
Example #1:



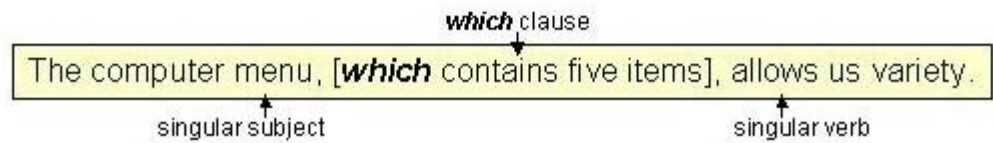
Example #2:



Example #3:

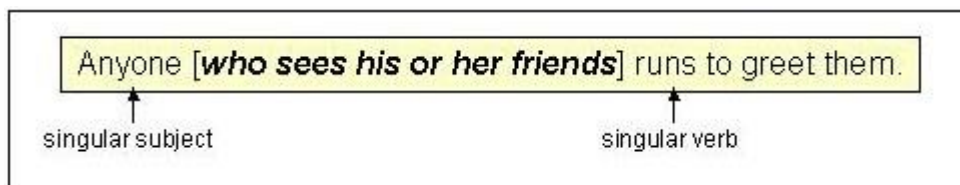


Example #4:

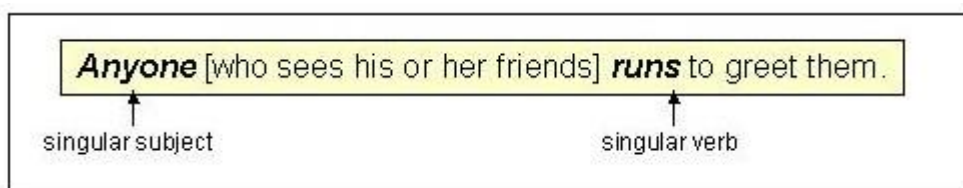


TO AVOID SUBJECT – VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS . . .

1. Identify *who / that / which* clauses immediately.



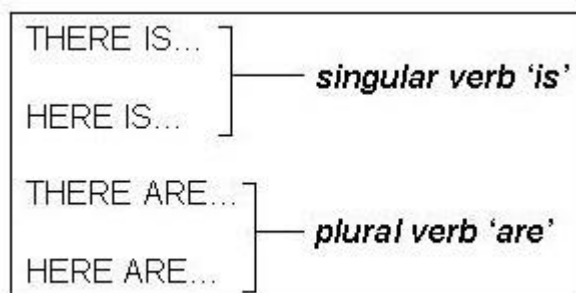
2. Locate the true sentence subject and choose a verb that agrees with it.



Now click on the link below to do exercise 7.

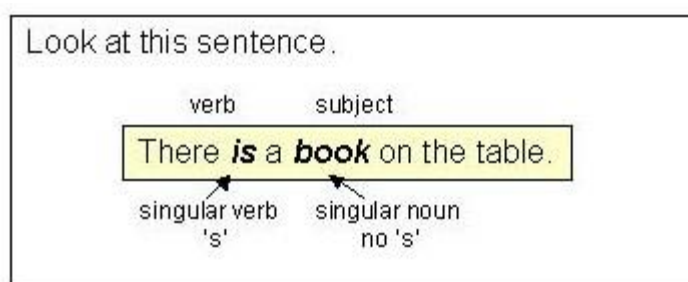
[Link to Exercise 7](#)

When a sentence begins with **there is – there are / here is – here are**, the subject and verb are inverted. After all that you have learned already, you will undoubtedly find this topic a relatively easy one!



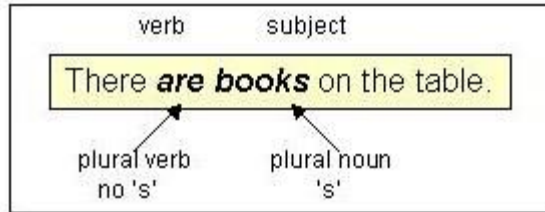
The verb in such constructions is obviously **is** or **are**. The subject, however, does not come BEFORE the verb.

Instead, the subject in this kind of sentence comes AFTER the verb, so you must look for it AFTER the verb.



In this example, because the subject, **book**, is singular, the verb must also be singular.

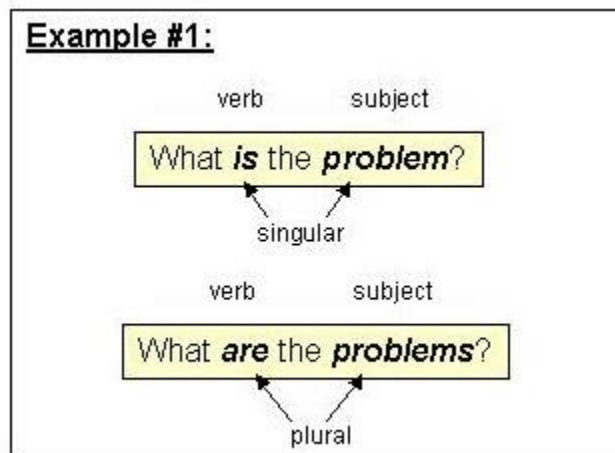
If the subject is plural, however, then the verb must be plural.



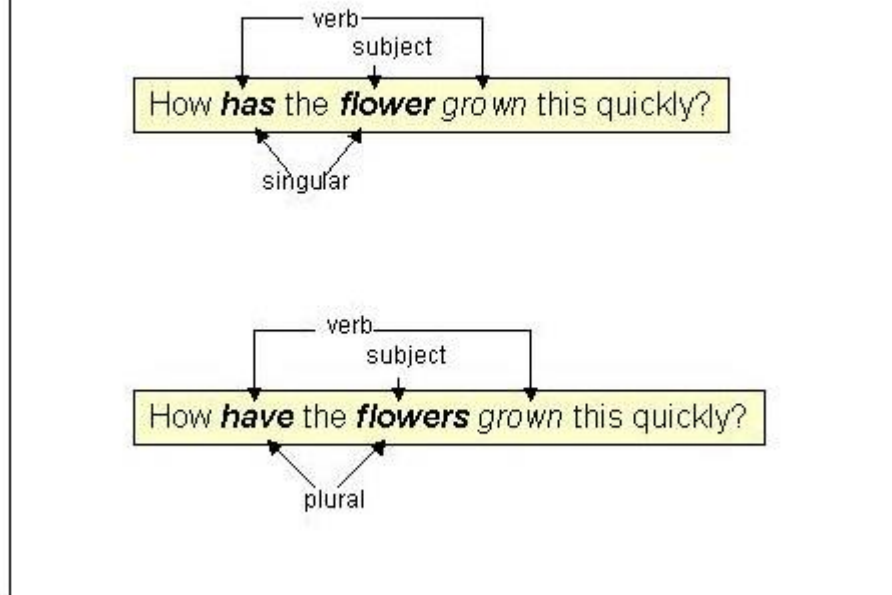
In this example, because the subject, **books**, is plural, the verb is also plural.

Remember: In *here is – here are / there is – there are* constructions, look for the subject **AFTER** the verb and choose a singular (*is*) or a plural (*are*) verb to agree with the subject.

And finally, sometimes creating a question will cause the subject to follow the verb as well. Here, identify the subject and then choose the verb that agrees with it (singular or plural).



Example #2:



Now click on the link below to do exercise 8.

[Link to Exercise 8](#)

Subject - Verb Agreement - Post Test



To see how well you have learned the rules for subject – verb agreement, do the POST TEST below. There is no checklist of answers for the POST TEST. Instead, you should have your responses checked by the Writing Support Program office.

POST TEST DIRECTIONS: The following sentences contain one or more subject – verb agreement errors. Circle all subjects and underline all verbs. Check carefully to see whether or not the subject agrees with its verb. If the subject does agree with its verb, write “C” above the verb. If the subject and verb do not agree, however, write the correct form of the verb above the faulty one.

You must print out a copy of this original page to complete the Post Test. Make your corrections right on the paper; then bring your completed Post Test to the Writing Support Program office for evaluation and review.

Link to [Printable Post Test](#)

The *Titanic*

1. About 1,500 passengers on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* was sent to a watery grave when the luxurious ocean liner sank in 1912.
2. The ghostly remains of the ship lies in a lonely berth more than two miles deep in the North Atlantic.
3. For nearly three-quarters of a century, while everyone were celebrating the *Titanic* in legend, the wreckage of many pieces were sitting on the ocean floor.
4. On September 1, 1985, a search party of American and French diving teams were thrilled to discover her.
5. Their photographs and video has given the public memorable close-up looks at one of the great maritime disasters of the 20th century.
6. In 1987, a new French diving team were sent to explore the sunken vessel.
7. Jewelry found in the rooms of the passengers were salvaged and shown to the world.
8. Although many people has objected to this mission, neither storms nor negative public sentiment has kept the French company from continuing its mission.
9. In 1997, James Cameron made the film *Titanic* with a new deep-sea camera that could withstand the enormous atmospheric

pressure in the deep water where the pieces of the Titanic is still sitting.

10. While viewers of the film sees only twelve minutes of footage in the movie, Cameron and his crew was shooting many hours of film on twelve dives to the wreck.

11. There is people who believe that the ship should be left alone as a memorial to the many people who was lost at sea when it sank.

12. What are your opinion?

<https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/sub-verb.htm>

<https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/moduleSVAGR.htm>

<https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/moduleSVAGRposttest2.htm>