

Subject-Verb Agreement

Making Actions and Actors Agree



One of the most important parts of a paper's flow is making sure that all of the components of each sentence agree with one another grammatically. One of the most common errors in agreement is subject-verb agreement. The subjects and verbs of a sentence need to agree with one another. Most subject-verb agreement stems from point of view and singular/plural nature (known as *inflection*); an important first step in making sure your subjects and verbs agree is learning to identify subjects and verbs, and recognizing them in a sentence.

Subjects and Verbs

Subjects and verbs occur in every sentence; they make sentences work. Every sentence has an action (even if that "action" is simply a state of being) and someone or something that performs that action. If you have a simple sentence like "The dog runs down the street," you have the action ("runs") and the actor ("the dog"). The verb is the action, and the subject performs that action. Sometimes, the actor of a sentence is not a specific noun, but a concept or a group of words. For example, "Studying the material prepares students for their tests." In that sentence, "studying the material" is the subject. Even though it describes an action, it doesn't do so in action *form* but rather names the *concept of studying*. The main action of the sentence is "prepares," because that is the operative part of the sentence.

In other cases, the verb isn't a concrete action but rather a state of being. For example, in the sentence, "The astronauts are weightless in orbit," the verb is "are." There really isn't a clearly defined action, but in order for the sentence to be complete, *something* must connect "the astronauts" (the subject) to the adjective describing their state of weightlessness, so the sentence uses the appropriate form of the verb "be," which, in this case, is "are."

In fact, if you're ever uncertain of what the verb in the sentence is, a good first step is to look for one of the verb forms of the word "be," which are "is," "am," "are," "was," "were," and "will be." If you see one of those words in a sentence, it is an operative verb in that sentence.

Verb Forms

Verbs take different forms depending on how they are used in the sentence, and on what the subject of the sentence is. Verbs will take one of five forms:

- **Base form.** This is the "normal" form of a verb – that is, the form you would look for if you were consulting a dictionary. (Exaples: *walk, march, speak*)
- **"S" form.** This is the singular form of a verb for third-person point of view. For regular verbs, it's created simply by adding "-s" or "-es" to the end of the base verb. (Examples: *walks, marches, speaks*)

- **Past tense form.** This is the form a verb takes when it's describing events that occurred in the past. It is usually formed by adding "-d" or "-ed" to the end, but there are many irregular verbs that do not follow this rule. (Examples: *walked, marched, spoke*)
- **Past participle form.** This is when a verb is used as an adjective. It usually looks the same as past tense, but with irregular verbs, the past tense and past participle often look different, as in "ate" (past tense) vs. "eaten" (past participle). As a verb, it is usually combined with some form of the helping verb "have" or "be." (Examples: *walked, marched, spoken*)
- **Present participle/gerund form.** This form of the verb is used to show that something is in a state of happening, or to quantify the act of the verb in noun or adjective form (e.g. "*running* water"). It is formed by the "-ing" suffix. As a verb, it is paired with some form of "be." (Examples: *walking, marching, speaking*)

Inflection and Agreement

In present tense, the point of view and singular/plural nature of the subject (two concepts collectively known as *inflection*) determine what form of the verb should be used. For many subjects, present tense verbs simply take the base form. However, for third-person (that is, any subject *other* than "I," "we," or "you"), the form of the verb depends on whether the subject is singular or plural.

For instance, "I *walk* up the street" uses the base form of the verb "walk" because the subject is first person ("I"). The verb would also take the base form for plural first person ("We walk") or second person ("You walk"). In third, person, however, the form of the verb depends on whether the subject is singular or plural. Plural subjects stay with the base form of the verb ("The neighbors walk"), but singular subjects use verbs with the S form ("The dog *walks* beside me").

It's very important to clearly know the subject associated with each verb. Sometimes other words can cause confusion as to the singular/plural nature of the subject, which can in turn cause confusion with the verb. Remember that the subject is the *specific noun* (or word group acting as one noun) that performs the action of the verb. It is *not necessarily* the noun closest to the verb. For example:

WRONG: The group of friends meet for lunch on Thursdays.

RIGHT: The group of friends meets for lunch on Thursdays.

In the above example, the instinctive thing is to use "meet," the plural form of the verb, because the noun "friends" is immediately before it. However, this is not correct because "friends" is not the subject; the actual subject of this verb is "group." Even though the word "group" implies more than one person, it is not plural, because it only refers to *one* group. Therefore, since the subject ("group") is singular, the verb should take the S form to reflect that.

Tense Agreement and Participle Confusion

For most verbs, agreement is only a talking point in present tense, because past tense uses the same form for all inflections. However, there are some cases where tense issues do matter.

“Be”

The forms of the verb “be” are important to know, because they are treated differently from other verbs in both present tense and past tense. The “base form,” roughly, is “are” in present tense (“we are,” “you are,” “they are”). The equivalent of the S form is “is” (“he is,” “the dog is”). There is an additional form for the verb “be,” however. For other verbs, the first person singular (“I”) simply takes the base form (“I walk”), but for “be,” there is a dedicated form for singular first-person in present tense: “am,” as in, “I *am* going to the store.”

Another key difference is that unlike other verbs, “be” actually has more than one past tense form. For singular subjects (whether first person or third person), the correct form is “was” (“I was tired last night,” “The dog was twitching as he dreamed”). For all other subjects, the correct past tense is “were.”

WRONG: They was on their way home when the storm hit.

RIGHT: They were on their way home when the storm hit.

Participle Confusion

For most verbs, there’s no apparent difference between past tense and past participle. However, they *are* two different forms, and some verbs do reflect that. A common error with irregular verbs is using the participle where the past tense is needed.

WRONG: They seen the movie yesterday.

RIGHT: They saw the movie yesterday.

In the above example, the first sentence is incorrect because “seen” is the past *participle* form of “see,” not the past tense. The past participle, despite how it may appear, actually has no tense on its own. It is paired with a helping verb, typically a form of “have” (active voice, as in “I *have seen* the movie three times”) or “be” (passive voice, as in “The film *is seen* as avant-garde by many critics”). For simple past tense, however, the correct form is “saw.” There are many verbs whose past tense and past participle take different forms – for instance, “ran” vs. “had run,” “went” vs. “had gone,” “ate” vs. “had eaten,” “came” vs. “had come,” “wrote” vs. “had written,” and so forth. An exhaustive list of irregular verbs would not fit within the scope of a resource like this one, but those are just a few of the most common examples.

Of course, “be” also has a different past participle form. Where the past tense is “was” or “were,” the past participle is “been,” used with a form of “have.” For example:

WRONG: I been at school every day this week.

RIGHT: I have been at school every day this week.

Correcting Subject-Verb Disagreements

When you’re correcting the subject-verb errors in your papers, remember that correcting subject-verb disagreements has little to do with verb tense; tense and agreement are two separate concepts. For instance, writing “The pack of wolves attack cattle sometimes” is wrong – but it *cannot* be corrected by changing “attack” to “attacked,” because that would completely alter the sentence’s meaning. This sentence can’t be corrected by changing its tense; it must be corrected by making the verb match the subject. The subject is “pack,” which is singular and therefore requires the S form: “The pack of wolves attacks cattle sometimes.”

Similarly, participle disagreements need to be understood and corrected outside the framework of tense, because a participle's form stays the same regardless of the tense of the sentence ("He had written" or "He has written." These two have different tenses, but "written" remains the same for both).

Some irregular verbs ("come" and "run," for instance) can be doubly confusing because their past participle forms are the same as their *present* tense base forms. For instance:

RIGHT: I ran to the store yesterday. (Past tense)

RIGHT: I run to the store each Friday. (Present tense)

RIGHT: I had run to the store for milk, but there was none left. (Past participle)

A common mistake is using the present tense – which doubles as the past participle – in places where the *past* tense is needed. In this way, a sentence can be *grammatically* correct from a technical perspective, but it would still be wrong because the *context* of the sentence doesn't match its verbs. For instance:

WRONG: I run to the store last night but come home empty-handed.

RIGHT: I ran to the store last night but came home empty-handed.

Most subject-verb agreement errors arise because of verbs using the S form when they shouldn't, or, more commonly, *not* using the S form when they *should*. Correcting those types of errors ultimately comes down to knowing point of view and inflection and knowing how to identify the subject of a sentence.

Additional Writing Center Resources

- Point of View
- Fragments and Run-Ons

Further Reading

- "Making Subjects and Verbs Agree." Purdue Online Writing Lab.
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/599/01>
- "Regular and Irregular Verbs." Oxford Dictionaries. (Includes a list of irregular verbs.)
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/regular-and-irregular-verbs>