Tutorial for Subject-Verb Agreement

**What is it?**

**Subjects and verbs must agree in** [**person**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#p) **and** [**number.**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#n)

**How to find errors**

**Subject-verb agreement errors often occur in the following situations:**

1. **When other words or** [**phrases**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#p) **come between the subject and its verb.**

**Faulty**

The number of farm workers have remained constant over several decades.

(The subject, *number,* is singular and requires a singular verb, even though the phrase *of farm workers* appears between the subject and verb.)

1. **In sentences with two or more subjects joined by *and.*** Subjects joined by *and* are plural and require a plural verb.

**Faulty**

A dot and a dash represents the letter A in Morse code.

(The subject, *a dot and a dash,* is plural and requires a plural verb.)

**Faulty**

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, media magnate Rupert Murdoch, and news correspondent Sam Donaldson was born on March 11.

(The subject, *Antonin Scalia, Rupert Murdoch, and Sam Donaldson,* is plural and requires a plural verb.)

1. **In sentences with two or more subjects joined by *or, either…or, or neither…nor.*** In this case, the verb should agree with the subject that is closest to it.

**Faulty**

Math or accounting appear to be a suitable major for you.

(The closest subject is singular, so the verb should be singular.)

**Faulty**

Neither the sailors nor the boat were harmed by the storm.

(When one subject is plural and the other singular, the verb should agree with the subject closest to it.)

1. **With** [**collective nouns,**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#c) **such as *family, couple,* and *class.***

**Faulty**

The school committee have voted to increase teachers’ salaries.

(Because the committee is acting as a unit, a singular verb is needed.)

**Faulty**

The team is traveling by train, bus, and bike.

(Because the team members are acting individually, a plural verb is needed.)

1. **With** [**indefinite pronouns**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#i) **such as *anyone, everyone, each, every, no one,* and *something.*** Most indefinite pronouns are singular.

**Faulty**

Everyone in this room are welcome to express an opinion.

*(Everyone* is an indefinite pronoun, which requires a singular verb.)

1. **With** [**relative pronouns,**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#r) **which need to agree with their** [**antecedent.**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#a)

**Faulty**

Toni Morrison, who enjoy unique success as both a popular and a literary author, won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993.

*(Who* refers to Toni Morrison, and because Toni Morrison is singular, the verb should be singular.)

**Faulty**

Look for stores that displays this sign.

*(That* refers to *stores,* a plural noun. Therefore, the verb should be plural.)

1. **When a subject follows a verb, which often happens in sentences that begin with *here* or *there* or with a** [**prepositional phrase.**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#p)

**Faulty**

There are a false panel somewhere in this room.

(The subject is *panel,* which requires the singular verb *is.)*

**Faulty**

Under the stairs lurk a solitary spider.

(The subject is *spider,* which requires the singular verb *lurks.)*

1. **With a** [**linking verb,**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#l) **which needs to agree with its subject, not the word or phrase that renames the subject.**

**Faulty**

The bluebell are any of several plants in the lily family.

(The subject is *bluebell,* not *plants,* and requires the singular verb *is.)*

1. **When the subject is a title or a singular noun ending in *-s.***

**Faulty**

*Gulliver’s Travels* are a satire by the eighteenth-century British writer Jonathan Swift.

(Even though it ends in with a plural word, *Gulliver’s Travels* is one title and takes a singular verb.)

**Faulty**

Linguistics deal with the study of human speech.

(Although it ends in *-s, linguistics* is a singular noun and takes a singular verb.)

**How to fix errors**

**Here are some guidelines for correcting the most common pronoun-antecedent agreement errors:**

1. **Make sure the verb agrees with the subject, not with words that come between the subject and verb.**

The number of farm workers has remained constant over several decades.

1. **Use a plural verb when two or more subjects are joined by *and.***

A dot and a dash represent the letter A in Morse code.

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, media magnate Rupert Murdoch, and news correspondent Sam Donaldson were born on March 11.

1. **Revise to make the verb agree with the subject closest to it when two or more subjects are joined by *or, either…or, or neither…nor.***

When two or more singular subjects are joined by *or, either…or, or neither…nor,* use a singular verb.

Math or accounting appearsto be a suitable major for you.

Either the waiter or the customer has misplaced the bill.

Neither the doctor nor the patient is pessimistic about the prognosis.

When one singular and one plural subject are joined by *or, either…or, or neither…nor,* the verb should agree in number with the subject nearest to it.

Neither the sailors nor the boat was harmed by the storm.

Neither the boat nor the sailors were harmed by the storm.

Either my daughters or my wife waters that plant daily.

1. **Use a singular verb with most** [**collective nouns,**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#c) **such as *family, couple,* and *class.***

When the members of the group are acting as individuals, however, use a plural verb.

The school committee has voted to increase teachers’ salaries.

(The committee is acting as a unit.)

The team are traveling by train, bus, and bike.

(The team members are acting individually.)

To make their meaning clearer and avoid awkwardness, writers often add *members* or a similar noun.

The members of the team are traveling by train, bus, and bike.

1. **Use a singular verb with most** [**indefinite pronouns,**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#i) **such as *anyone, everyone, each, every, no one,* and *something.*** Singular indefinite pronouns include the following: *each, either, neither, anyone, anybody, anything, everyone, everybody, everything, one, no one, nobody, nothing, someone, somebody, something.*

Everyone in this room is welcome to express an opinion.

Neither of the candidates has run for office before.

Other indefinite pronouns, such as *several, both, many,* and *few,* take a plural verb.

Several of you jog at least three miles a day.

Some indefinite pronouns, such as *all, any, more, most, some,* and *none,* take either a singular or a plural verb depending on the noun to which they refer to. To decide which verb to use, follow this rule: Treat the indefinite pronoun as singular if it refers to something that cannot be counted and as plural if it refers to more than one of something that can be counted.

Most of the water goes into this kettle.   
(You cannot count water.)

Some of the children in the study choose immediate rather than delayed rewards.   
(You can count children.)

1. **Revise to make verbs agree with the antecedents of *who, which,* and that.**

When a [relative pronoun](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#r) *(who, which, that)* refers to a singular noun, use a singular verb. When it refers to a plural noun, use a plural verb.

Toni Morrison, who enjoys unique success as both a popular and a literary author, won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993.

Look for stores that display this sign.

Neither the doctor nor the patient is pessimistic about the prognosis.

Using *one of the* often leads to errors in subject-verb agreement. The phrase *one of the* plus a noun is plural.

A pigeon is one of the two birds that drink by suction.

However, *only one of the* plus a noun is singular.

The cheetah is the only one of the big cats that has nonretractable claws.

1. **Revise to make the verb agree with a subject that follows it.**

When a sentence begins with the word *here* or *there* (which cannot function as a subject) or with a [prepositional phrase,](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#p) the subject often follows the verb. Look for the subject after the verb and make sure the subject and verb agree.

There is a false panel somewhere in this room.

Under the stairs lurks a solitary spider.

1. **Make sure a** [**linking verb**](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/exercisecentral/glossary.html#l) **agrees with its subject, not a word or phrase that renames the subject.** In sentences with linking verbs, the verb should agree with the subject.

The bluebell is any of several plants in the lily family.

1. **Use a singular verb when the subject is a title or a singular noun ending in *-s,* such as physics or news.**

*Gulliver’s Travels* a satire by the eighteenth-century British writer Jonathan Swift.

Linguistics deals with the study of human speech.