

# HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER

## GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

### The Verb System: Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement refers to a change in the form of a verb depending on its subject. The subject of a verb may be singular or plural and it may be **first-person** (I, we) **second-person** (you [singular], you [plural]), or **third-person** (he/she/it, they).

In English a verb changes form only when its subject is third-person singular (he/she/it) and only in the present tense. The following chart illustrates this rule:

Present		Past	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
I walk	We walk	I walked	We walked
You walk	You walk	You walked	You walked
He/She <b>walks</b>	They walk	He/She walked	They walked
It <b>walks</b>	They walk	It walked	They walked

The rule for subject-verb agreement is that **in the present tense, a verb with a third-person singular subject must always end in -s**. As you can see, the past tense form is the same regardless of the subject.

A third-person singular subject is any word or phrase that can be replaced with one of the pronouns **he**, **she**, or **it**.

Nancy Colon [**she**] is going to lead a march on the White House. The rest of the group [**it**] will follow her. The rally [**it**] is scheduled for 1:15 PM. Some marchers [**they**] may arrive early. They should wait for the rest of the group before raising their placards. In fact, no one [**he/she**] should raise a placard, sign, or banner until the entire group [**it**] is assembled on the lawn.

## SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

There are several sentence constructions that may make it difficult for you to determine whether the main verb should have an **-s** ending.

### 1. When Words Separate the Subject from Its Verb

Words that come between a subject and its verb do not affect the number (singular or plural) of the subject. You must determine which word is the sentence's subject and then use it to decide whether the verb needs an **-s** ending.

The **color** of the stage setting **seems** drab.

The **colors** of the stage setting **seem** drab.

A **computer** with a variety of memory chips **serves** a special purpose.

**Computers** with a variety of memory chips **serve** a special purpose.

Sometimes words that come between a subject and its verb may contain a complete clause with a subject and verb of its own. Most often this will be a **relative clause**, beginning with **who**, **which**, **that** or, less often, **where** or **when**. This can be confusing because it's hard to tell which verb goes with which subject. Remember, a subject and verb need only agree when they are in the same clause.

A **woman** who has a career and a family **has** very little time for herself.

Relative pronouns may be either singular or plural, depending on what noun they refer to. Therefore the verb of a relative clause must agree with the noun that it is referring to.

A **woman who has** a career can still be a good mother.

**Women who have** careers sometimes wait to have children.

Be particularly careful editing subject-verb agreement when the words that separate a singular subject from its verb sound like they are making the subject plural. These words include expressions such as **in addition to**, **as well as**, **including**, and **together with**. These expressions do not function like the word **and**. In other words, they do not make the subject plural even though they sound like they do.

A **microcomputer**, as well as a mainframe, **uses** silicon chips.

A **microcomputer and a mainframe** **use** silicon chips.

The **processing unit**, together with all of its types of memory, **forms** the heart of the machine.

The **processing unit and the various types of memory** **form** the heart of the machine.

The **memory**, including the ROM and RAM, **performs** the computer's operations.

The **memory unit and the ROM and RAM** **perform** the computer's operations.

### 2. When the Subject Comes after Its Verb

In some sentences, you may reverse the order of a subject and its verb in order to achieve an interesting effect. In other sentences, you may want to begin with the words **There** or **Here**. These sentence openers move the true subject to a position after its verb. When you are editing your verbs, make sure that you check these sentences very carefully to find the subject and to determine the correct form of the verb.

At the end of the list **is** the divorced **man**.

At the end of the list **are** divorced **men**.

There **is** one significant **reason** why men remarry.

There **are** many **reasons** why men remarry.

However, remember that when you write a sentence that begins with the word **it** you must always use the singular form of the main verb (which usually ends in **-s**).

**It seems** that women have the greatest difficulty remarrying.

**It does not mean** that men do not have any problems.

**It appears** that men have a greater tendency to avoid commitment than do women.

### 3. When Two or More Subjects are Joined by **Or** or **Nor**

When two or more subjects in a sentence are joined by **or** or **nor**, the verb form is usually determined by the subject that is closest to the verb.

Neither that woman nor her **friends are** unfulfilled.

Neither those women nor this **one is** unfulfilled.

It is true that a career or **children affect** a woman's marriageability.

It is true that children or a **career affects** a woman's marriageability.

### 4. When the Subject is a Singular Pronoun

When used as a subject, the following pronouns are always considered singular and need verbs with **-s** endings on them in the present tense: **each, either, neither, every, everybody, everyone, everything, anybody, anyone, anything, somebody, someone, something, nobody, no one, nothing.**

**Everything contributes** to the problem.

**Someone** who was abused as a child **is** likely to victimize his or her own children.

**Nobody** who deals with the problem **has** all of the answers.

In terms of subject-verb agreement, the most troublesome pronouns on the list above are **everybody**, **everyone**, **either**, **neither**, **every**, and **each**. **Everybody** and **everyone** sound like groups but grammatically they behave like singular subjects.

**Everybody has** to be concerned about family violence.

**Everyone** who deals with families **sees** these problems.

**Either**, **neither**, **each**, and **every** are always singular subjects unless they are used with **or** or **nor**.

**Neither is** going to explode soon.

**Either** his sister **or** his parents **are** going to explode soon.

**Each** family member **has** control over his/her aggression.

## 5. When Words Separate a Singular Pronoun Subject from Its Verb

When a singular pronoun, such as **either**, **neither**, **each**, or **every** is separated from its verb by other words, it is easy to get confused about the form of the verb. Remember that words that come between a subject and its verb do **not** affect the number of the subject or the form of the verb.

**Either** of the parents **is** going to explode soon.

**Neither** parent **is** in control.

**Each** of the family members **has** to control his or her aggression.

**Each** and **every** cause subject-verb agreement confusion when they are separated from their verbs by the phrase **of them** or by two nouns joined by **and**.

**Each** of them **seems** to be prone to violence.

**Each** of their parents **has** a repressed personality.

**Every** father and mother **has** to be careful.

The pronouns **some**, **none**, **any**, and **most** can be either singular or plural subjects depending upon the words that follow them. For example, **some** can mean "more than one," in which case the subject is plural, or it can mean "a part of one," in which case the subject is singular.

**Some** of the families studied **commit** emotional abuse.

**Some** of the problem **is** caused by television.

**Most** of the family members **remain** silent about it.  
**Most** of the information **comes** from their neighbors.

## 6. When the Subject is a Collective Noun

A collective noun is the name of a group that usually functions like a single unit. Some examples include **family, class, audience, crowd, committee, team, jury, orchestra** and **group**. If you are referring to the group as a single unit, then the noun is a singular subject (and needs an **-s** ending on its verb). If you are referring to the individual members of the group, then the noun is a plural subject.

The **team** of scientists **monitors** the Milky Way.  
The **team** of scientists **disagree** about those stars.

This **group** of stars **is** known as the Andromeda Galaxy.  
That **group** of stars **have** separated to form new galaxies.

There are a few phrases that look just like collective nouns but function differently. They include, among others, the following:

A number of ...  
A couple of ...  
A lot of ...

These phrases act like quantifiers, e.g.: some, many, a few , with the plural noun that follows the preposition acting as the main noun of the phrase and taking a plural verb.

A number of **teachers assign** too much homework.  
A couple of **my friends work** full-time.  
A lot of **people believe**

There is one collective noun that does function like the others listed above: the word **number**. When it is used in the phrase **the number of**, it is always a singular subject, and when it is used in the phrase **a number of**, it is always a plural subject.

**A number** of galaxies **are** shaped like disks.  
**The number** of disk-shaped galaxies **is** growing.

## 7. When the Subject is a Quantity

Like collective nouns, words that state a quantity or an amount usually function like singular

subjects. Words of quantity include amounts of time, money, height, length, width, space, and weight.

**One hundred thousand light years is** an extremely long time.

**Three million dollars is** the cost of the typical telescope.

Quantities can also function like plural subjects when they refer to a part of something, not the whole thing. Usually in this case, the quantity is followed by the word **of**.

**Two-thirds of all galaxies are** elliptical in shape.

## 8. When the Subject Looks Plural But is Singular in Meaning

There are many subjects that look plural (in other words, that end in **-s**) but are singular in meaning. These include the names of school subjects--**mathematics, linguistics, physics, economics, civics**--and the names of some diseases--**measles, mumps, AIDS, and herpes**. They also include miscellaneous words like **politics** and **news**.

**Physics is** the study of vector and scalar quantities.

**Herpes is** now impossible to cure.

The **news** about spiral galaxies **seems** unbelievable.

**Mumps makes** one's cheeks hurt and causes swelling and fever.

## 9. When the Subject is a Title

Even when a title is plural (like The New York Times), it functions like a singular subject, and it needs an **-s** ending on its verb.

**The Hales Observatories tracks** comets and meteors.

**Principles of Astronomy explains** the rotations of that galaxy.

**One Hundred Thousand Galaxies provides** fascinating explanations about the content of the universe.

## 10. When the Subject is a Verbal Phrase

Sometimes an **-ing** or **to + infinitive** verb form is used as a noun. A phrase containing one of these forms may appear as the subject of a sentence. In these cases, the subject is always singular.

**Learning** how to do something well **takes** practice and determination.  
**To see is** to believe.