**What is subject-verb agreement?**

**Subject:** what the sentence is about  
**Verb:** expresses an action or describes a state of being (i.e. *seems...*)

Subject-verb agreement guarantees that plural subjects go with plural verbs (actions) and that singular subjects go with singular verbs when count nouns (nouns of which there is a quantifiable amount) are used by a writer.

So, for example:

- The three dogs bark. (Dogs is plural so is bark).
- The dog barks. (Dog is singular so is barks.)

As you can see, count gets tricky because often, the verb for singular actions has an S and the noun for plural actions has an S. You have to stay on your toes to stick to clear subject-verb agreement.

**Why is subject-verb agreement important?**

Agreement in person and number between subjects and verbs is key if one wishes to show their proficiency in academic writing. By keeping subject-verb agreement accurate, your audience is better able to follow along with your points and analysis.

Keep in mind:

- Adjective pronouns (who, which, that) are also in a sentence, usually as a noun phrase. These pronouns do not affect agreement; the verb following these pronouns should still agree with the noun to which the verb refers.
  - Examples:
    - The student who participates in class often gets a better grade.
    - The students who participate in class often get better grades.

**How can I write using this agreement?**

**Identify patterns in proficient writing:**

1. Many verbs only change in present tense for third person singular forms.\(^2\) For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
<td>I write</td>
<td>We write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
<td>You write</td>
<td>You write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Person</strong></td>
<td>It/ they/she/he writes</td>
<td>They write</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The verb *be* has its own patterns, offering a wider range of verb forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular Present</th>
<th>Singular Past</th>
<th>Plural Present</th>
<th>Plural Past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
<td>I am</td>
<td>I was</td>
<td>We are</td>
<td>We were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
<td>You are</td>
<td>You were</td>
<td>You are</td>
<td>You were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Person</strong></td>
<td>He/she/they/it is</td>
<td>She/he/they/it was</td>
<td>They are</td>
<td>They were</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 Adapted from: “Subject-verb Agreement,” Subject-verb Agreement—Center for Writing: University of Minnesota.  
2 Past tense verbs, regardless of subject—I/you/he/we/they—are the same for all subjects.
3. Sometimes, it helps to identify subjects and verbs that are related in a sentence to make sure they’re in agreement.

   a. **Questions to keep in mind:**
      i. Who (subject) does what (verb)?
         1. She appears tired.
      ii. What (verb) does who (subject) do?
         1. Example: The care was given by the doctor.

   b. **Look out for situations in which:**
      i. The subject and verb are separated by other words
         1. Example: The students in the back row of the auditorium were not paying attention.
      ii. The subject is delayed (i.e. comes after there + a form of be: is, are, was, were, will be)
         1. Example: There are many reasons to question the findings of this study.
      iii. Multiple subjects exist (if so, use a plural verb form!)
         1. Example: The doctors, nurses, and the experienced dietician all consulted on the case.
         2. Example: Salt and pepper add flavor to any meal.
      iv. Multiple verbs occupy the same sentence (all verbs should agree with the subject)
         1. Example: That instructor provides clear instructions and evaluates papers fairly.

**Deciphering whether the subject is singular or plural:**

- **Cases of either/or and neither/nor:**
  - Verb tense depends on the subjects involved
    - Example: 2 singular subjects mean you need a singular verb.
      - Neither the cathedral nor the castle interests me.
    - Example: 2 plural subjects mean you need a plural verb.
      - Neither the cathedrals nor the castles interest me.
    - Example: 1 plural & 1 singular subject means the verb agrees with whichever subject is closest to it in the sentence.
      - Either my twin brothers or my sister was here.
      - Either my sister or my twin brothers were here.

- **Collective nouns:**
  - Group nouns (i.e. staff, committee, audience, group, class, jury, etc.) are considered singular subjects
    - Example: As the team rallies, the crowd goes wild.
  - Plural nouns (such as members) may be added to draw attention to individuals within a group
    - Example: The team members were arguing vociferously with each other.

- **Indefinite pronouns:**
  - Pronouns that do not specifically refer to any person or thing (e.g. anybody, anything, each, either, everyone, everyone, nobody, nor, someone, something, etc.) & use singular verbs
    - Example: Everybody in the study struggles with depression.
  - Indefinite pronouns—all, any, none, and some—can be either singular or plural, depending on the noun that follows
    - Example: Some of her writing was dark. Some of her poems were dark.

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