

Subject-Verb Agreement

Explanation

In the present tense verbs must agree with their subjects. both must be singular, or both must be plural.

I	breathe	the air.	He	breathes	the air.
You	breathe	the air.	She	breathes	the air.
They	breathe	the air.	It	breathes	the air.

...connections...

For more help identifying subjects and verbs, turn to page 693, Subjects, Verbs & Clauses.

You must add an **-s** or **-es** at the end of the verb when the subject (or the entity performing the action) is a singular third person: **he**, **she**, **it**, or words for which these pronouns could substitute. This is not a problem in the past or future tenses (*skipped* and *will skip*, for instance), but becomes trickier in the present tense.

Examples

<u>He, She, It</u>	<u>All others</u>
<u>Roberto</u> <u>eats</u> all of the oranges.	<u>They</u> <u>eat</u> everything but the rind.
<u>She</u> <u>wonders</u> which constellations are hidden.	<u>I</u> <u>wonder</u> if Leo has already passed.
<u>It</u> <u>lasts</u> for another three hours or until they score.	<u>Veronica and Kevin</u> <u>last</u> as long as they can.

To Create the plural/singular

To make a noun plural, we usually add an **-s** or **-es**, as in the case of *jar* to *jars* or *box* to *boxes*. Some nouns, such as *deer* and **non-count nouns** like *courage* and *fear*, act differently and you must assess them in context. See *Subjects, Verbs & Clauses*.

A verb is singular, by contrast, when it is matched with a singular subject. A singular verb, then, usually has an **-s** or **-es** ending, as in the case of *talks* and *fixes*.

Finding the subject and verb

To successfully determine whether or not your subjects and verbs agree, you need to be able to locate them in your writing. The subject in a sentence is the agent that is doing whatever is done in the sentence. The verb is the action--what is actually done. Look at this example:

- The zebra runs down the street.

“The zebra” is the subject of this sentence, and “runs” is the verb.

Use Pronouns to Help

When the **pronouns** *he*, *she* or *it* are used as a subject in a sentence, the verb is always singular, and therefore will contain an **–s** or **–es** ending.

- He takes the money.
- She stacks the papers.
- It chimes hourly.

All other pronouns (I, you, we, they) require a plural verb (one without an **–s** or **–es** ending).

- They skate until March if the ice holds.
- We borrow money to pay our loans.

You can use these pronoun rules to determine whether your verb should be plural or singular. Let’s look at a variety of subjects, and see which pronouns can replace them.

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Pronoun substitute</u>	<u>Verb</u>
John, Marion and Isaac	They...	grow.
The community forest	It...	grows.
The leading investigator	She...	
The Leaning Tower of Pisa	It...	

So, if you can substitute *he*, *she* or *it* for the subject, your verb ought to be singular (with an **–s** or **–es**).

Practice Exercises

Circle the correct verb for each sentence.

Tip: write the pronoun above the subject to help you identify whether the verb should be singular or plural.

(*He*)

1. Jordan (hang / **hangs**) the picture upside down above his futon.

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2. *Starry Night* (contain / contains) eleven stars and one swirling moon.

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3. The hammers (pound / pounds) the nails until each corner is flush against the wall.

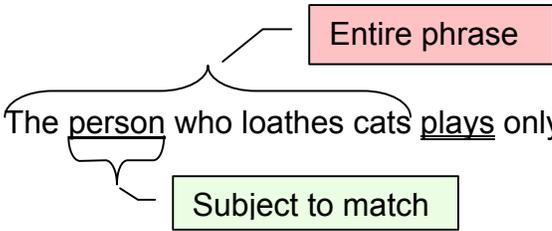
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4. Van Gogh’s sister (take / takes) most of the credit for his genius.

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5. The yellows in the painting (swirl / swirls) around the blue sky rather than the other way around.

Complicated subjects

Some subjects include phrases that might confuse you into choosing the wrong verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not the noun or pronoun in the phrase.

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- The person who loathes cats plays only with their tails.
 - One of the brothers is missing.
 - The computer building, including all of the labs, closes its doors promptly at seven.

Subjects connected by “and” require a plural verb. Subjects connected by “or” or “nor” require a singular.

- John and Jeff drive downtown.
- A sandwich or muffin is fine.
- Neither rain nor shine help the soccer field.

If a compound subject has both plural and singular nouns, follow the pronoun rule for the noun *closest* to the verb.

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- One walnut or two acorns fill a squirrel for a day.

Agreement Exercise

Fill in the verb for each sentence.

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	
Martin and his mother	<i>play</i> [to play]	backgammon every day after work.
The junior or senior	[to march]	in the Homecoming parade.
A plum, and not the carrots,	[to provide]	valuable nutrients to the body.
Martha or Dan’s children	[to scribble]	on the wall to create their art.
The banana’s peel	[to stretch]	across the floor to make them trip.
Saving of electricity	[to take]	strong initiative, but benefits all of us.
The group of friends	[to call]	each card aloud to win the game.

Agreement Practice Paragraph: The Supreme Court

Underline each subject once, each verb twice, and fix any incorrect verbs. The first sentence is done for you.

The Supreme Court Justices rejoices after a particularly difficult decision. Though they usually lean on the chief justice to announce the ruling (unless he is in the minority) each celebrate in his or her own way. A reporter, speaking on the condition of anonymity, tells that in each session, the justices bickers back and forth even when they seem to agree. One or two bicker more than the others, but no one keep silent for long. All this bickering produces so much tension that when they finish a case, they all must go their separate ways until at least the following week when they repeat the whole process.