

LUC WRITING CENTER – “SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT”

The Rules:

In a sentence, a *singular subject* must always have a *singular verb form*, while a *plural subject* must always have a *plural verb form*.

Examples:

1. Loyola University is cold in the winter. (*one university*; “is” is the singular form of “to be”)
2. Desserts are always sweet. (*more than one dessert*; “are” is the plural form of “to be”)

Two or more singular subjects connected by “and” usually take a *plural verb*.

Example:

1. Loyola University and Northwestern University are cold in the winter. (*two universities*; “are” is the plural form of “to be”)

Words such as “each” and “every”, and **phrases** such as “either...or” and “neither...nor” take a *singular verb*.

Example:

1. Neither cake nor ice cream would taste delicious with pickles. (*two singular subjects*; “taste” is the singular form of “to taste”)

Three common reasons why these rules can be confusing:

I. These rules can be confusing because of the use of -s in making words plural. A final -s or -es is added to nouns to make the noun *plural*. A final -s or -es is added to a simple present verb when the subject of the verb is a *singular noun*.

Examples:

1. Our dog makes a lot of noise. (*one dog*, no -s; the *singular simple present tense* of “to make” has an -s on the end of the word)
2. Our dogs make a lot of noise. (*more than one dog*; *plural simple present tense* does not have an -s.)

II. These rules can also be confusing when using “there” + to “be”: When using “there” + a form of the verb “to be,” *look for the real subject of the sentence*. The number of the verb will always follow the number of the real subject of the sentence. For example, in the sentence “*There are three windows in this classroom*,” “windows” is the real subject of the sentence, and since “windows” is *plural*, the form of “to be” is also *plural*.

Examples:

1. There is an apple in his lunchbox. (*one apple*, therefore *singular verb form*)
2. Why is there a shortage of affordable apartments for rent in Chicago? (*one shortage*, therefore *singular verb form*; “apartments” is not the real subject of the sentence)

III. These rules can be confusing when *other words or phrases come between the subject and the verb*. Any words that come after a subject as a rule do not usually change that subject’s

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number. For example, in the sentence *"That group of men going about their business is hard to see,"* “group” is the subject, which takes the singular verb “is.”

How to Notice and Correct Any Errors:

To find subject-verb agreement errors, *you must locate the subject and verb within the sentence, no matter how many words or phrases are between them.* To correct any errors, you must make sure that *a singular subject has a singular verb form, and that a plural subject has a plural verb form.*

Practice:

Read each of the following sentences carefully. For each sentence, decide whether the subject of the sentence is *singular or plural*. Then choose the appropriate form of the verb in parentheses.

1. Knowing how to communicate your ideas clearly (is, are) necessary for a successful career.
2. Before enrolling at public school, every child (need, needs) to be vaccinated for certain diseases.
3. Although Indonesia is politically unified, its cultural heritage (is, are) remarkably diverse.
4. Both boys and girls (has, have) to learn how to cook.
5. Organic apples, oranges, and bananas (is, are) nutritionally equal to non-organic varieties.

More Practice:

Correct the errors in the following sentences. *Some of the sentences have no errors.*

- 1) The vegetable plants in my garden are both beautiful and useful.
- 2) A lot of the students at my school takes classes in the evening so they can work.
- 3) The research about the long-term effects of screen time on infants and toddlers often date from studies of children who were born before television was widely available.
- 4) Most of the recipes in the cookbook is based on traditional Southern dishes.
- 5) Until there are a profound and extensive shift towards sustainable agriculture, the welfare of future generations remain uncertain.

Further Resources:

- [“Making Subjects and Verbs Agree”](#) (Purdue Owl)
- [“Subject-Verb Agreement”](#) (Portland Community College Writing Center)
- [“Subject-Verb Agreement”](#) (SIUC Writing Center)