

Subject-Verb Agreement

In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third). If the subject is third-person singular (he/she/it), the present-tense ending of the verb will generally be –s (or –es, e.g., she gives). Otherwise, the verb takes no ending (e.g., I give, you give, we give). (The verb be is an exception, since it has special forms in both the present and the past tenses.)

- Note that SASS, like many academic and governmental institutions, fully supports the use of the **singular “they”** as a gender-neutral pronoun. Therefore, “they” in this resource is sometimes considered singular, and other times considered plural; context makes the distinction clear.

Make sure the verb agrees with its subject, not with a different word or word group that separates them (usually the subject complement, which names or describes the subject).

- Difficult pieces of musical composition requires constant practice. **X**
Revised: Difficult pieces of musical composition require constant practice.
- A major proportion of the Canadian population are immigrants. **X**
Revised: A major proportion of the Canadian population is immigrants.

Compound subjects

A subject with two or more components connected by “and” is called a compound subject and is nearly always plural.

Art historians believe that the triptych and the fresco were painted by Perugino in 1496.

Singular subjects

However, if the components of the subject form one unit or if they refer to the same person or thing, treat the subject as singular.

- Mumilaaq’s home and office was where she spent most of her time.

When each or every precedes a compound subject, treat the subject as singular.

- Every cell performs a particular function.

Note: As Diana Hacker, in *A Canadian Writer’s Reference*, notes, titles of works, company names, “words mentioned as words,” and gerund phrases are singular.

- Finding lost treasure (gerund phrase) is a dream of many people.
- Desperate measures is an overused expression.

Additionally, Hacker identifies words like athletics, mathematics, statistics, news, economics, physics, and mumps as generally singular, despite their plural forms:

- Mathematics is a fascinating subject.

...except when they describe distinct items instead of “a collective body of knowledge.”

- Athletics in the Olympic Games vary between winter and summer sports.

Or, nor, either, neither

With subjects connected by or, nor, either . . . or, or neither . . . nor, the verb should agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

- Neither the patient’s kidneys nor their liver was healing as doctors had predicted.
- A dancer or gymnast is necessary for the performance.
- When an alarm or siren goes off, my dog tries to hide from the sound.
- Either Lyn’s sister or parents are coming for graduation.

Verbs typically follow subjects, but even if the order is inverted, the subject and the verb should still agree.

- There were surprisingly few options on the menu.

Indefinite pronouns

Treat most indefinite **pronouns** (which refer to nonspecific persons or things) as singular. Indefinite pronouns include anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, no one, somebody, someone, something.

- Everyone in the class was talking at the same time.

All, any, none, some

Certain indefinite pronouns (all, any, none, some) may be singular or plural, depending on the noun or pronoun to which they refer.

- Any of Dionne Brand’s books are good reading choices.
- All of his pain medication was gone.
- Some public schools have a French Immersion program.
- None of the counsellor’s career advice was useful.

Collective nouns

Collective nouns (jury, committee, crowd, army, audience, group, staff, family, couple, etc.) should be treated as singular unless the meaning is distinctly plural.

The cricket team has played for three days in a row.

References

Hacker, D. (1995). *A Canadian Writer’s Reference* (3rd ed.). St Martin’s Press.