Agreement

Sentences are easier to understand when parts of them “match,” or grammatically agree with each other. This handout will cover subject/verb agreement, pronoun/antecedent agreement, and parallelism.

Subject/Verb Agreement
Subjects and verbs agree when they are the same in number. A singular subject must have a singular verb, and a plural subject must have a plural verb.

Incorrect: The cat want the milk.
Corrected Verb: The cat wants the milk.
Incorrect: The dog like to run.
Corrected Subject: The dogs like to run.

Special Concerns

Intervening words: Sometimes words (such as modifiers, prepositional phrases, or clauses) separate the subject and verb. Cross them out to determine if the subject and verb agree.

Example: The woman who sold you the watches is back.

Subjects joined by “and”: When multiple subjects are joined by “and,” they are considered plural.

Example: The doctor and the nurse are very friendly.

Subjects joined by “or” and “nor”: When multiple subjects are joined by “or” or “nor,” the subject closest to the verb decides if the verb is plural or not.

Example: Neither the nurses nor the doctor knows what to do.

Indefinite pronouns: Pronouns such as “everybody,” “nobody,” or “anyone” are singular.

Example: Nobody knows the extent of the damage.

“There is” and “There are” sentences: When sentences begin with these words, the verb reflects the number of whatever the “there” refers to.

Example: There are dogs.

Relative pronouns: When words such as “who,” “which,” or “that” are the subject of a clause, the verb agrees with the pronoun’s antecedent (see next section).

Example: The car that was stolen belongs to her.

Words which may be singular or plural: Some words may be singular or plural, depending on how they are used.

Correct: The deer is here. (The deer in this sentence is an individual animal.)
Correct: The deer are in the forest. (“Deer” in this sentence refers to a group of animals.)
Verb Tense
The tense of a verb shows the time in which the action of a sentence takes place.

- Present tense: I walk or I am walking.
- Past tense: I walked.
- Future tense: I will walk.

Tense should remain consistent. Make sure the verbs agree within a sentence or a paragraph. Unless you have a specific reason for shifting, verbs should always be in the same time frame. For example, both verbs are either present tense or past tense.

Incorrect: Juliet saw Romeo, then says, “Romeo, Romeo.” (Shift from past to present)
Correct: Juliet sees Romeo, then says, “Romeo, Romeo.” (Both in present)

Note: a shift in tense should only be used when writing about different time periods.

Example: Kristy will perform (future tense) tomorrow night, exactly three years after she won (past tense) the women’s figure skating gold medal.

Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement
A pronoun is a word that is substituted for a noun, such as “she” for “the woman.” An antecedent is the noun that a pronoun refers to. They agree when they are either both plural or both singular.

Incorrect: The nurse finished their rounds.
Correct: The nurse finished his rounds.

Antecedents joined by “and”: Treat antecedents joined by “and” as plural.

Example: Sheila and James go to school.

Antecedents joined by “or” or “nor”: When antecedents are joined by these words, the antecedent closest to the pronoun determines whether it is singular or plural.

Example: Neither the computer nor the phones work.

Parallelism
Parallel structure is using the same pattern of words when listing things of equal importance. This can happen at the word, phrase, or clause level.

Incorrect: I like hiking, swimming, and to ski.
Correct: I like hiking, swimming, and skiing.

Incorrect: The manager wanted her employees to report quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.
Correct: The manager wanted her employees to report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

Incorrect: He told his students to study, that they should rest a lot, and be waking up early for the exam.
Correct: He told his students to study, to rest a lot, and to wake up early for the exam.