

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.