

Agreement and Parallelism

Subject-Verb Agreement

Verbs need to agree with the subject in both person and number.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Recognize errors in subject-verb agreement

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- Verbs must agree with their subject in person and number.
- A first-person subject is *I* or *we*. Second person is *you* or *you all*. Third person is *she*, *he*, *it*, or *they*.
- A singular subject is a subject where there is only one person or thing; a plural subject is more than one person or thing.
- It's good to double-check whether your verb agrees with your subject, as there are situations where it may be unclear.

Key Terms

- **verb**: A word that indicates an action, an event, or a state of being.
- **plural**: More than one in number.
- **mass noun**: A thing or concept usually referred to as a whole, rather than counted individually (e.g. advice or water).
- **collective noun**: A number of people or things taken together and spoken of as a whole.

Subject-Verb Agreement

In order for sentences to sound right, their verbs and subjects need to mesh well together. Since the subject is the one performing the action, the verb needs to match it in person and number.

“Person” is a way of saying who the subject is. There are three levels of “person” in English: first person, second person, and third person. To put it simply: In first person, the subject is *I* or *we*. Second person is *you* or *you all*. Third person is *she*, *he*, *it*, or *they*.

“Number” is a way of saying how many people (or objects) are in the subject. If only one person is in the subject, it's singular. Otherwise, it's plural.

Thus, a subject has both person and number, and the verb takes on the appropriate form. Take the examples below:

- Singular first person: *I work*

- Singular first person: I work.

- Singular second person: You work.
- Singular third person: He works.
- Plural first person: We work.
- Plural second person: You work.
- Plural third person: They work.

The verb “work” has two different forms, “work” and “works,” depending on the subject.

Unusual Situations

As clear as this all seems, some situations are a bit trickier than others. For example, take an irregular verb like “be.”

- Singular first person: I am.
- Singular second person: You are.
- Singular third person: He is.
- Plural first person: We are.
- Plural second person: You are.
- Plural third person: They are.

This verb is highly irregular, and so it can be trickier to make sure that the subject and verb match in tense and number.

This is not the only unusual situation, however. Subject-verb agreement can become a little more complicated when the subject is very long and complex. When faced with situations like these, it is generally best to consider the entire complex subject phrase as one subject, and then think about what kind of thing it represents.

Compound Sentences

Compound sentences (two sentences joined by a clause) have a subject and verb in each clause. Make sure the subject of each clause agrees with the verb of each clause.

- The peanut butter *is* on the counter and the beans *are* in the bag.
- The children *have* a snow day, so I *am* going home early.

Modifying Phrases

Sometimes modifying phrases can come between the subject and verb of a sentence. This should not affect the subject-verb agreement.

- The *idea* of serving frankfurters *is* a good one.
- The *children*, along with their father, *are* taking a cab to the station.

Verb Precedes Subject

Sometimes the subject of a sentence can come after its verb. Even in these cases, the verb should still agree with the subject.

- Where *are the candles* for the cake?

- There *is a quiet spot* by the pond.

Compound Subjects

Compound subjects (two subjects joined by a conjunction) take plural verbs if they are joined by “and.” Think of it this way: you’ve got more than one subject, so your verb has to be plural.

- The president and the children *are* at the party.
- My brothers and I *are* at the party.

Positive and Negative Subjects

When a positive subject and a negative subject are compounded and have different numbers, the verb should agree with the positive subject.

- It *is* not the assistant coaches but the head coach who *calls* the plays.
- It *is* the soup, but not the appetizers, that *has poisoned* the queen.

Or

When two nouns differing in number are joined by the word “or,” the verb should take the form of the noun closest to it. For example:

- Most viewers of the painting assume that either the monkey’s antics or the handler’s chagrin *causes* the young men’s laughter.

“Chagrin” is closer to the verb than “antics,” so the verb “causes” takes the singular form. Note that this is the case specifically because of the word “or.”

Indefinite Pronouns

Five indefinite pronouns always take plural verbs: *others, both, many, few, and several.*

- Both *are* arriving at the same time.
- Many people *love* parties.

However, most indefinite pronouns take singular verbs.

- Everybody *is* at the party.
- Either restaurant *sounds* good.

Some indefinite pronouns can take a singular or plural verb based on whether the noun to which they are referring is uncountable (singular) or countable (plural).

- Some (sand) *is* in my shoe.
- Some (pebbles) *are* in my shoe.

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns (which refer to a group of beings or things as a single unit) are singular, and so take singular verbs.

- The audience was silent at the end of the play.
- The class has plenty of homework for the weekend.

Mass Nouns

Mass nouns, like “water” or “mud” are neither singular nor plural. You can’t say “one water” or “two waters” because it’s all just a continuous object (unless you are talking about two distinct containers of water). Mass nouns represent a generic, unknown amount of whatever they are. They take a singular verb form.

- My baggage was left at the airport. [The subject *baggage* is a mass noun, so the verb *was* is singular.]
- My bags were left at the airport. [The subject *bags* is a plural noun, so the verb *were* is also plural to agree with the subject.]

Amounts

Amounts take singular verbs because they are treated as units, which are singular nouns.

- Ten dollars is enough to buy the book.
- All I need is fifteen minutes to finish the exam.

Some non-amount words end in “s” but also take singular verbs because they refer to units or single entities.

- Economics is an interesting subject.
- The news airs at six o’clock.

Pair Words

Some words ending in “s” refer to single objects but are considered plural and so should take plural verbs, unless they are preceded by “pair of” (in which case “pair” would be the subject).

- Your shoes are bright yellow.
- My favorite pair of pants is in the wash.

Titles

The title of a book or work of art is always singular even if a noun in the title is plural.

- *The Three Musketeers* is sitting on the shelf by the window.

Sums and products take singular verbs in mathematical equations. Fractional expressions vary depending on the meaning.

- Three plus four equals seven.
- Three-fourths of the professors vote Republican.



The child stands near the door.: The title demonstrates the necessity of subject-verb agreement. The third person subject, “The child,” requires that the verb also take a third person singular form, “stands.”

Revising

Most of the time, writers use subject-verb agreement automatically. Most of us are so used to doing it that we do not need to think about the rule in order to follow it. Nevertheless, you should be aware of subject-verb agreement when editing your papers, especially if they have gone through many revisions. This is one thing writers may forget to edit. Most mistakes happen because writers are not paying careful attention to the number and person of their subjects.

To figure out which noun the verb should agree with, begin by crossing out any prepositional phrases or other descriptive clauses. Then focus on the verb and ask yourself, “Who or what is performing this action?” Pare it down to just a subject and verb, and see if it sounds right. Writers need to consider whether the subject of the sentence is singular or plural, and whether the subject is first person, second person, or third person. Once this has been determined, the correct conjugation of the verb can be used.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

All pronouns must agree with the antecedent to which they refer.

All pronouns must agree with their antecedent in number and gender.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Recognize errors in pronoun-antecedent agreement

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun or a group of nouns in a sentence.
- A pronoun should agree in number and gender with the noun or phrase it refers to.
- The noun or phrase a pronoun refers to is called the antecedent.
- Using proper pronoun-antecedent agreement is important to properly expressing your ideas in writing.

Key Terms

- **antecedent:** A noun or noun phrase to which a pronoun refers.
- **pronoun:** A word that replaces a noun or group of nouns in a sentence.

Pronouns and Antecedents

A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun, or a group of nouns, in a sentence or sentences. A pronoun should agree in number and gender with the noun or phrase it refers to, which is known as the antecedent. Correct pronoun-antecedent agreement is crucial to writing professionally.

A pronoun might have an antecedent from the previous sentence:

- *Carolina* hates cats. *She* has terrible allergies. [The pronoun *she* refers to the antecedent *Carolina*.]

But pronouns and antecedents can also occur in the same sentence:

- *Jim* said *he* doesn't like coffee. [The pronoun *he* refers to the antecedent *Jim*.]
- The *twins* helped by bringing *their* truck. [The pronoun *their* refers to the antecedent *twins*.]

Quantity Agreement

"Singular" means "one of something," whereas "plural" means "more than one." The singular pronouns include *I*, *me*, *he*, *she*, *it*, and *more*. Their antecedent will always be singular: just one person or object.

- *Jamil* was not as hungry. *He* stayed at the office. [The singular pronoun *he* refers to the antecedent *Jamil*.]

Examples of plural pronouns include *we*, *us*, *they*, and *others*. These pronouns must have an antecedent that is more than one person or object.

- *George*, *Omar*, and *Phil* were starving for lunch. *They* went to a Chinese buffet. [The plural pronoun *they* refers to the

antecedent *George, Omar, and Phil.*]

One tricky exception is “you.” In English, the pronoun “you” is the same whether it is singular or plural. Sometimes you can distinguish between the two by saying “you all” if you are speaking to more than one person.

Gender Agreement

In some situations, pronouns need to be gender specific. The pronouns *he*, *his*, and *him* are masculine, whereas *she*, *her*, and *hers* are feminine.

- Janice wanted to go to the mall. She wanted Scott to join her. He was not interested in going to the mall. [The pronouns *she* and *her* refer to the antecedent *Janice*. The pronoun *he* refers to the antecedent *Scott*.]
- My dog *Franklin* is very skittish. *He* doesn't enjoy the dog park. [The pronoun *he* refers to the antecedent *Franklin*.]

Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Gender-neutral pronouns include *you*, *they*, *their*, *theirs*, *we*, *us*, *our*, *ours*, *your*, and *yours*. In the case where the gender of the antecedent is unknown, the pronoun should be gender-neutral or avoided altogether.

For example, take the general statement, “A student should hand his papers in promptly.” In this sentence, the word *student* does not indicate any gender, because it's just a general, anonymous student. Therefore, rather than saying “his papers,” use one of the following:

- A student should hand papers in promptly. [Here, the gendered pronoun has been dropped, but the sentence is still grammatically correct.]
- *Students* should hand *their* papers in promptly. [By making the antecedent plural, you can use the gender-neutral plural pronoun *their*.]

Structural Parallelism Within a Sentence

Parallelism requires that similar ideas be presented in similar form.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Give examples of parallel structure

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- Parallelism is when two or more elements of the same sentence have a similar structure.
- The most important parallel markers are the three most common conjunctions: *and*, *but*, and *or*.
- Parallelism requires that an article (*a*, *an*, or *the*) or a preposition applying to all members of a series must either appear before the first item only or be repeated before each item.

Key Terms

- **parallelism:** When two or more elements of the same sentence have a similar structure.

Parallelism

An unclear sentence rambles, drifting among unrelated topics in a haphazard and confusing fashion. Parallelism helps promote balance, emphasis, clarity, and readability. But what *is* parallelism?

Parallelism is when elements of a sentence “echo” each other because they have similar form or structure. Repeating key words can contribute to unity within an essay. Parallelism can be useful in many situations, but often we know that it will come in handy when we use words that link or contrast items, such as *and*, *or*, and *but*.

Basic Form of Parallelism

- Nonparallel: Students spend their time going to classes, studying, working, and they wish they had time for a social life.
- Parallel: Students spend their time going to classes, *studying, working, and wishing* for a social life.
- Nonparallel: High-school students hope for short school days, or four-day weeks would be great, too.
- Parallel: High-school students hope for *short school days or four-day weeks*.

Using Articles with Parallelism

Parallelism requires that an article (*a*, *an*, or *the*) or a preposition applying to all items in a list either appear before the first item only or be repeated before each item. Here are a few examples of the rule in action:

- Nonparallel: We can pay with a mark, a yen, buck, or pound.
- Parallel: We can pay with *a mark, a yen, a buck, or a pound*.
- Nonparallel: I went to the store on Monday, Wednesday, and on Friday.
- Parallel: I went to the store on *Monday, Wednesday, and Friday*.

Prepositions in Parallelism

Some words require that certain prepositions precede them. When such words appear in parallel structure, it is important to include all of the appropriate prepositions, since the first one may not apply to the whole series of items. Here are a few examples of the rule in action:

- Nonparallel: His speech was marked by disagreement and scorn for his opponent’s position.
- Parallel: His speech was marked by disagreement *with* and scorn *for* his opponent’s position.
- Nonparallel: This is a time not for words but action.
- Parallel: This is a time not *for* words but *for* action.

Correlative Expressions

Correlative expressions are words that tend to show up in pairs. Sentences with correlative expressions (*both/and*; *not/but*; *not only / but also*; *either/or*; *first, second, third...*) should employ parallel structure as well. Simple rewriting can often remedy errors in these types of sentences. Here are a few examples of the rule in action:

- Nonparallel: Either you must grant her request or incur her ill will.
- Parallel: You must *either* grant her request *or* incur her ill will.
- Nonparallel: My objections are first, the injustice of the measure, and second, that it is unconstitutional.

- Nonparallel: My objections are first, the injustice of the measure, and second, that it is unconstitutional.
- Parallel: My objections are *first*, that the measure is unjust, and *second*, that it is unconstitutional.

Using Logic to Determine Structure

In some instances, you must figure out which parts of the sentence are parallel in meaning before making them parallel in structure. Here is an example:

- Correct: Sal applied himself in his new job, *arriving* early every day, *skipping* lunch regularly, and *leaving* late every night.

In the sentence above, the -ing participle phrases (“arriving early every day,” “skipping lunch regularly,” and “leaving late every night”) are parallel. The main clause—“applied himself in his new job”—is not parallel to these participle phrases. This is because the main verb is “applied.” The -ing phrases simply provide additional information about how Sal applied himself. It would distort the meaning to change the sentence to this superficially parallel version:

- Incorrect: Sal applied himself in his new job, arrived early every day, skipped lunch regularly, and left late every night.

This version gives all the activities equal emphasis, instead of making the last three activities subordinate to the main activity (“applied himself in his new job”).

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

