Subject-Verb Agreement

The Center

A difficulty many writers experience is a lack of agreement between the subject and the verb in a sentence. A singular predicate must express the action of a singular subject, while a plural predicate must express the action of a plural subject. Similarly, a first-person predicate must express the action of a first-person subject.

Here are some of the common issues with subject-verb agreement.

Closest noun
A lack of agreement can occur when other words are placed in between the subject and verb:

Incorrect: Each of the students are responsible for paying tuition costs on time.
Correct: Each of the students is responsible for paying tuition costs on time.

The verb in the incorrect sentence are agrees with the closest noun, "students," but it should agree with "each," the subject. The correct verb is is.

Subjects with multiple parts
A lack of agreement can occur when subjects with multiple parts are connected by and, either/or, or neither/nor. In the case of subjects with two or more parts connected by and, the subject should be considered plural, and the verb should also be plural in form.

Incorrect: Rob and Cindy plans a two-week vacation from their jobs.
Correct: Rob and Cindy plan a two-week vacation from their jobs.

Since "Rob and Cindy" is connected with "and," it is a plural subject; therefore, the verb should be the plural plan. However, when subjects with two or more parts are connected by either/or OR neither/nor, the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is nearest to the verb.

Incorrect: Either Rob or Cindy plan to till the garden next week.
Correct: Either Rob or Cindy plans to till the garden next week.

Since "Rob or Cindy" is connected by either/or, the predicate needs to agree with "Cindy," the part of the subject that's nearest to the verb; therefore, the predicate should be the singular plans.

Indefinite pronouns/collective nouns
A lack of agreement can occur when indefinite pronouns or collective nouns are the subject of a sentence. Indefinite pronouns like "any," "everyone," and "nothing," which have singular meanings, should have singular verbs.

Incorrect: Any of us are qualified to do the job.
Correct: Any of us is qualified to do the job.

The word "any" refers to "any one person," which is singular; the verb should be the singular is.
Everyone in our group loves to ride roller coasters.

The word "everyone," although referring to many people, has a singular meaning: the verb should be the singular loves.
Similarly, collective nouns like “class,” “family,” and “team” refer to a group that acts as a single unit. These nouns, too, should have singular verbs.

**Correct:** The sophomore class **votes** today on the new student senate president.

The word "class" refers to a group acting as one; the correct verb is the singular votes.

**There is/It is/There are**

Finally, a lack of agreement can occur when a sentence begins with the words “there is,” “it is,” or “there are.” When a sentence begins with “there” or “it,” the verb should agree with the noun that follows that word, which is called a "subject complement":

**Correct:** There **is** a great old movie showing at the cinemaplex tonight. Since "movie" follows “there” and "movie" is singular, the verb should be is.

**Correct:** There **are** three frightening horror films showing at the cinemaplex tonight.

Since "films" follows "there" and "films" is plural, the verb should be are.

**The “Rule of S”**

The “Rule of S” is a great proofreading strategy to help with subject-verb agreement. Here is how it works:

- If the noun ends with an “s” the verb will not.
- If the verb ends with an “s” then the noun will not.

Decide if your subject should be singular or plural. Then, choose an appropriate verb by applying the **Rule of S.**

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