



SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT

Subjects and verbs need to agree grammatically. This section highlights some of the most common problems writers have in making subjects and verbs agree.

7a Check for simple subjects or head nouns

Knowing which word is the simple subject or the head noun can help you with subject-verb agreement, especially when there are post-modifiers that come between the head noun and the verb. In the following sentences, the complete subject is in blue, and the simple subject or head noun is underlined.

- The pilot is ready to take off.
- The call sign for the president's plane changes with different planes; Air Force One is maintained by the Air Force, Navy One by the Navy, and Coast Guard One by the Coast Guard.



7b Check for prepositional phrases

A prepositional phrase can come between a subject and its verb and cause confusion.

- Each of the pilots is ready to fly Air Force One.

In the sentence above, *each* is the simple subject or head noun, and it is this simple subject that needs to agree with the verb *is*. Except with

a few indefinite pronouns (see 7d), you can ignore prepositional phrases when trying to determine what the simple subject is.

- To fly in the clouds is a great way to escape everyday problems.



7c

Check for parenthetical statements or interjections

Parenthetical statements or interjections that interrupt the sentence should not be considered when determining subject-verb agreement. These types of interrupters are easy to spot if punctuated correctly with commas.

- The pilot, in addition to the co-pilot, was unable to fly the plane.
- Scott Johnson, though, was able to take control in the cockpit.

7d

Check for indefinite pronouns as subjects

Most indefinite pronouns when used as subjects take singular verbs. See 3g for a list of indefinite pronouns.

- Something is wrong with the cockpit door today. Is that a sign of trouble?

Some indefinite pronouns when used as subjects take plural verbs. These include *both*, *few*, *many*, *others*, and *several*.

- Both Sally and John are pilots.
- Both are pilots.

Some indefinite pronouns when used as subjects can take either singular or plural verbs. These include *all*, *any*, *enough*, *more*, *most*, *none*, and *some*. The noun that the indefinite pronoun refers to determines whether the subject is considered singular or plural.

- **Some of the pilots** are unhappy about the coming tests.
- **Some of the ice** is melting.

7e

Check for compound subjects

In compound subjects, there will be more than one head or simple subject.

When the compound subject is joined by *and*, use a plural verb form.

- **She and he** are able to fly the plane.
- **Sally and John** always leave when the situation gets uncomfortable.
- **The pilot and the co-pilot** always leave the controls unattended.

When the compound subject is joined by *or*, use a singular verb form.

- **She or he** is able to fly the plane.
- **Sally or John** leaves when the situation gets uncomfortable.
- When **the pilot or co-pilot** leaves the controls unattended, a buzzer sounds in the cockpit.

When the indefinite pronouns *every* and *each* are used before compound subjects, look only at the indefinite pronoun and use a singular verb for subject-verb agreement.

- **Every pilot and co-pilot** learns how to land in dangerous situations.

When the correlative conjunctions *either...or*/*neither...nor* are used to join compound subjects, the verb should agree with the subject that is closest to the verb.

Singular → **Neither John nor Sally** is here today to fly the plane.

Plural → **Neither John nor the other pilots** are here today to fly the plane.

EXERCISE 1

Directions: Change thirteen verbs in the following paragraph that do not agree with their subjects.



Evil omens and signs of bad luck is known throughout the world. Western cultures believes walking under a ladder or having a black cat crosses your path will ensure a disaster of some kind. Spilling salt are also bad luck; the only remedy is to throw some salt over your right shoulder. Breaking a mirror cause seven years of bad luck, and you might as well stay in bed on Friday the 13th, because nothing good happen on this day. In fact, the number 13 should just be avoided altogether. In Russian culture, people who whistle indoors will loses all their money. Also, two people is never supposed to shake hands or talk across a threshold, and, if you forgets an item at home, don't go back for it: bad luck come to anyone who return home for a forgotten item. Never forgets that superstitious signs is around every corner.

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