

Subject – Verb Agreement

A sentence must contain a subject and a verb to be complete. The **subject** of a sentence functions as the topic of the sentence. It names *who* or *what* the sentence is about. The subject is always a noun or pronoun (sometimes with added modifiers) and relates directly to the verb of the sentence.

The **verb** of a sentence indicates an action of body or mind, a state of being, or an occurrence. The verb moves the meaning of the sentence along and can change form to show time (tense), person and number. Each verb needs to agree in number and person with its subject.*

- In the following rules and examples, subjects and verbs are referred to in their *simplest* forms.

Step 1: The first step in subject-verb agreement is to identify the subject and the verb in the sentence. Based on the above definitions, the subjects and verbs can be identified.

Examples: The math **student** **studies** diligently.
subject verb

The community **college** **promotes** a positive learning environment.
subject verb

Sometimes word order is reversed.

Examples: **Is** the 300-level **course** difficult?
verb subject

At the front of the classroom **sit** the serious **students**.
verb subject

Step 2: The next step is to consider the person (I, you, he/she/it, we, they) and number (whether the subject is singular or plural) of the subject. A singular subject requires a singular verb; a plural subject requires a plural verb.

	<small>subject</small> <small>verb</small>	<small>subject</small> <small>verb</small>	<small>subject</small> <small>verb</small>
Examples: Singular:	I run.	You juggle.	He is angry. (correct)
	I runs.	You juggles.	He are angry. (incorrect)

	<small>subject</small> <small>verb</small>	<small>subject</small> <small>verb</small>	<small>subject</small> <small>verb</small>
Plural:	We laugh.	You jump.	The cats meow. (correct)
	We laughs.	You jumps.	The cats meows. (incorrect)

*For more examples of types of verbs, please see the JCCC Writing Center verbs handout.

This chart gives examples of two regular verbs and three commonly used irregular verbs and their singular and plural forms for first, second, and third person in present tense.* Most academic writing uses third person forms.

Present-tense forms of the regular verb **love**:

	Singular		Plural	
	Subject	Verb	Subject	Verb
First person	I	love	we	love
Second person	you	love	you	love
Third person	he/she/it	loves	they	love

Present-tense forms of the regular verb **cook**:

	Singular		Plural	
	Subject	Verb	Subject	Verb
First person	I	cook	we	cook
Second person	you	cook	you	cook
Third person	he/she/it	cooks	they	cook

Present-tense forms of the irregular verb **have**:

	Singular		Plural	
	Subject	Verb	Subject	Verb
First person	I	have	we	have
Second person	you	have	you	have
Third person	he/she/it	has	they	have

Present-tense forms of the irregular verb **do**:

	Singular		Plural	
	Subject	Verb	Subject	Verb
First person	I	do	we	do
Second person	you	do	you	do
Third person	he/she/it	does	they	do

Present-tense and past-tense forms of the irregular verb **be**:

	Singular		Plural	
	Subject	Verb	Subject	Verb
First person	I	am	we	are
Second person	you	are	you	are
Third person	he/she/it	is	they	are

*For past tense usage, please see the JCCC Writing Center verbs handout.

- All examples are given in third person present tense.

Rule 1: When making the subject and verb agree in a sentence, beware of words or phrases that occur between the subject and verb.

Examples: The **room** at the daycare center **allows** for many activities.
subject *verb*

A flower **bed** of roses **makes** / ~~make~~ a garden elegant.
subject *verb*

Many **students** in the Writing Center ~~looks~~ / **look** tired.
subject *verb*

Rule 2: When parts of a compound subject are joined by **and**, they require a plural verb.

Examples: The **bass and cello** **create** a soft, mellow background.
subject *verb*

Music, theater, and art ~~exists~~ / **exist** in the category of the fine arts.
subject *verb*

Tennis and volleyball ~~requires~~ / **require** a certain amount of agility.
subject *verb*

Rule 3: When the two parts of a compound subject refer to the same person or thing, use a singular verb .

Examples: My **roommate and best friend** **calls** himself Jim.
subject *verb*

Rock and roll **remains** / ~~remain~~ a dynamic genre of music.
subject *verb*

Drinking and driving **causes** / ~~cause~~ many highway accidents and fatalities.
subject *verb*

Rule 4: When the subject word is in plural form but represents a singular idea, use a singular verb.

Examples: **Statistics** **proves** to be a difficult course for some students.
subject verb

Mumps **causes** / ~~cause~~ swollen glands and a sore throat.
subject verb

The evening **news** often **expresses** / ~~express~~ a particular political leaning.
subject verb

Rule 5: When the subject words are joined by *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, or *not only . . . but*, the verb agrees with the subject word that is nearest the verb.

Examples: Either his poor **bindings** or his bad **form** **causes** his falls on the ski slope.
first part second part verb
of the subject of the subject

Neither the **team** nor their **spouses** **attends** / **attend** the meeting.
subject subject verb

Not only **students** but also **parents** **comes** / **come** to the orientation.
subject subject verb

Rule 6: Collective nouns refer to groups (*audience, band, class, committee, crowd, faculty, family, government, group, herd, jury, public, team, etc.*). When members of a group are considered as a whole unit in the form of a collective noun, use a singular verb.

Examples: The **class** **respects** the views of the professor.
subject verb

The **family** **enjoys** / ~~enjoy~~ their discussions around the dinner table.
subject verb

The general **public** **is** / ~~are~~ not always aware of what occurs in government.
subject verb

Depending upon the writer's intent, occasionally members of a group are considered individually; in this case use a plural verb. To test, try saying "members of the jury, the gang, the class, etc." to hear the need for a plural verb.

Examples: The **class** **respect** the views of the professor.
subject verb

The **family** **enjoys / enjoy** their discussions around the dinner table.
subject verb

The general **public** **is / are** not always aware of what occurs in government.
subject verb

Rule 7: Indefinite pronouns are pronouns that refer to non-specific persons or things (*another, anybody, everyone, nothing, other, something, etc.*). Indefinite pronouns address everyone but one at a time, therefore indefinite pronouns take singular verbs.

Examples: **Everyone** **leaves** the meeting at the same time.
subject verb

By the end of the week, **everything** **was / were** a mess.
subject verb

Nothing **seems / seem** as real as our own perspective.
subject verb

A few indefinite pronouns (*all, any, enough, more, most, none, and some*) can be considered singular or plural, depending on whether the noun they refer to is singular or plural.

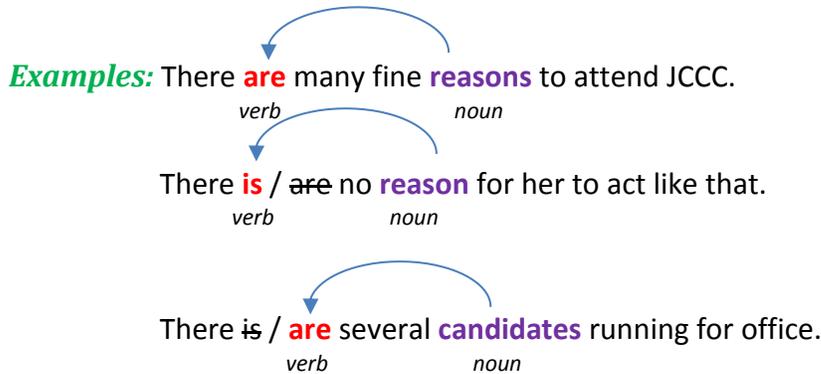
Examples: **Some** of my relatives **travel** to Kansas City for the holidays.
subject plural verb

Some of the textbook **reads** like a scientific journal.
subject singular verb

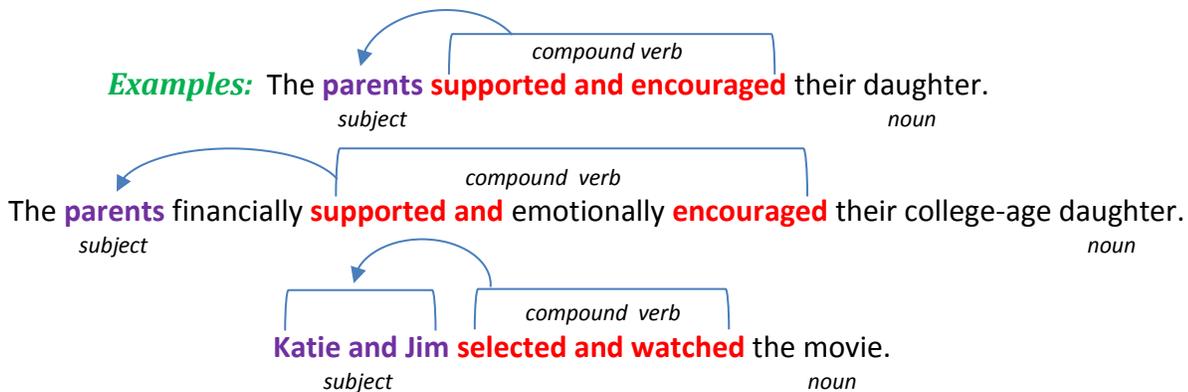
All of my friends **loves / love** to snow ski.
subject plural verb

All of my cooking **pleases / please** my hungry family.
subject singular verb

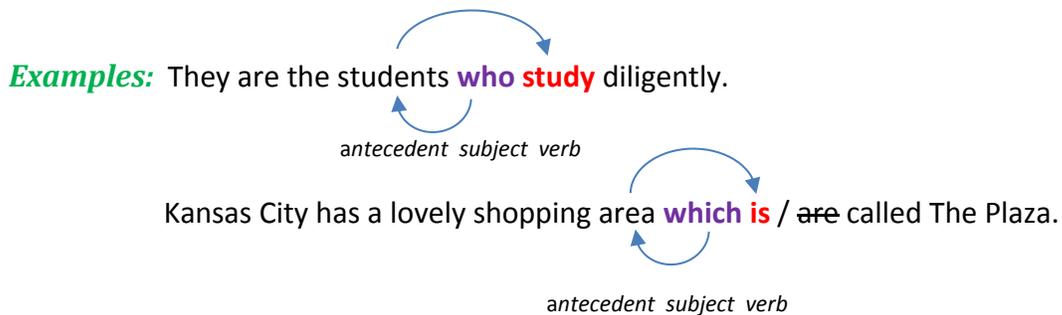
Rule 8: When using *there is* or *there are*, the verb agrees with the noun that follows the verb.



Rule 9: When a sentence pattern occurs with a compound verb, **subject + compound verb + noun**, the verb agrees with the subject, not the noun.



Rule 10: When the relative pronoun *who*, *which*, or *that* is used as a subject, the verb agrees with the previous word the pronoun refers to (the antecedent).



These are the basic subject-verb agreement rules; for more complex rules, please see Writing Center staff or several handbooks available in the JCCC Writing Center.

For exercises to practice your subject-verb agreement skills, please see Writing Center staff.