



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT

The subject of a verb affects the verb

A verb in present tense form changes depending on the subject.

| | |
|------------------------|------------------|
| <i>I walk</i> | <i>we walk</i> |
| <i>you walk</i> | <i>you walk</i> |
| <i>he/she/it walks</i> | <i>they walk</i> |

Notice that when the subject is *he*, *she* or *it*, you need to add an “s” to the end of the verb. The same is true when the subject is a noun such as *Cathy*, *a pen*, or *Vancouver*. If you replace these nouns with a pronoun, they are replaced with *he*, *she* or *it*.

| | |
|--|--|
| <u><i>He</i></u> <u>washes</u> the dishes every day. | <u><i>John</i></u> is usually late. |
| <u><i>They</i></u> wash the dishes every day. | <u><i>John and Susan</i></u> are usually late. |

Exercise 1: Choosing singular or plural verb forms

Circle the subject in each of the following sentences. Then underline the correct verb form and cross out the incorrect verb form.

Example:

Every morning Peter walk/walks to the park.

Here you would underline *walks*, and cross out *walk*.

1. He always take/takes his dog.
2. The dog is/are called Bear.
3. Bear and Peter especially like/likes walking through the woods.
4. After their walk, they often go/goes to the coffee shop.

Continued from page 1

5. Bear sit/sits outside and wait/waits while Peter get/gets a coffee.
6. Then they sit/sits outside and watch/watches the people go by.
7. When Peter finish/finishes his coffee, Bear and Peter go/goes home.
8. At home, Bear lie/lies down have/has a nap, and Peter leave/leaves for work.

Complications with Subject/Verb Agreement

Exercise 1 is not difficult, but subject/verb agreement isn't always so easy. Things that confuse writers about subject/verb agreement include:

- ◆ The subject doesn't look plural, but it is.
- ◆ The subject is a noun we don't count.
- ◆ Words come between the subject and the verb.
- ◆ The subject is a word like *who*, *which*, or *that*.
- ◆ The verb comes before the subject.
- ◆ The subject is an indefinite pronoun like *each*, *anybody* or *both*.

Each of these is explained here.

◆ The subject doesn't look plural, but it is

Usually plural nouns in English have an "s" or "es" on the end. However, some plural words do not end in "s". For example, *people*, *children*, *sheep* and *mice* can all be plural words. So, the subject is treated like *they* when you use these words. The question to ask yourself is, "Am I talking about one or more than one?" In this example, *Most children love chocolate.*, you are writing about more than one child. *Most children* can be replaced by *they*. Therefore, the verb does not get an "s".

◆ The subject is a noun we don't count

In English, some nouns are not counted. For example, we don't count water, happiness or gold. We might count glasses of water or liters of water, but we don't count the water itself. We cannot say one water or two waters. When we use non-count nouns like these, we treat the subject as singular. For example, we might say, *Water is a precious natural resource.* *Water* in this sentence can be replaced by *it*, so we treat water as a singular subject.

◆ Words come between the subject and the verb

Sometimes people get confused about the subject of a verb. This often happens when other words come between the subject and the verb. Look at these examples. Which one is correct?

- a) *The potatoes in the fridge are left over from last night.*
- b) *The potatoes in the fridge is left over from last night.*

To decide on the correct verb form, you need to decide which noun is the subject. What is left over, the potatoes or the fridge? Clearly, it is the potatoes. Therefore, the verb is controlled by *the potatoes*. The correct answer is a). The words *in the fridge* are between the subject and the verb.

When you decide on subject/verb agreement, you need to ask yourself, “What is the real subject of this verb?” It is a mistake to only look at the noun that comes before the verb.

Exercise 2: Choosing the correct verb form: complications 1, 2 and 3

Circle the subject in each of the following sentences. Then underline the correct verb form and cross out the incorrect verb form.

1. The cost of mattresses has/have gone up lately.
2. People often forget/forgets the importance of free time.
3. Brown rice is/are nutritious.
4. The homework for those classes is/are very time-consuming.
5. The equipment in those storage rooms is/are used by gym classes.
6. Unfortunately, many children in Mexico City lives/live on the streets.
7. My notes from that class isn't/aren't very hard to read.
8. Iron rusts/rust easily in wet weather.
9. The buildings under the bridge seems/seem empty.
10. The students in her class doesn't/don't like her exams.

♦ **The subject is a word like *who*, *which* or *that***

Look at the following example.

This course is not for people who hate writing.

This sentence has two verbs. Can you find them? The first verb is *is*. The subject of *is* is *this course*. The second verb is *hate*. The subject of *hate* is *who*. Now look at the next example.

She met a man who works for the phone company.

In this sentence, there is also a *who* subject. *Who* is the subject of the verb *works*. So, in the first sentence the subject *who* takes a verb without an “s”, but in the second sentence, the subject *who* takes a verb with an “s”. Can you explain why both are correct?

The reason both *who hate* and *who works* are correct is that the verbs are controlled by the noun *who* refers to. The *who* in *who hate* refers to *people*, a plural noun. The *who* in *who works* refers to *a man*.

When we use *who*, *that* or *which*, we have to look at what noun those words are referring to. Then we can decide on the subject/verb agreement.

Exercise 3: Choosing the correct verb form – complication 4

Circle the subjects in each of the following sentences. Then underline the correct verb form and cross out the incorrect verb form.

1. They lives/live in a city which has/have a high crime rate.
2. She goes/go to Douglas College which has/have three campuses.
3. John and his friend Lisa eats/eat at a restaurant which is/are near the skytrain station.
4. The man that was/were in the front row is my father.
5. That movie isn't/aren't for people who scares/scare easily.
6. Claire and Amanda shares/share an apartment which has/have two bedrooms.

◆ **The verb comes before the subject**

When the verb comes before the subject, some people get confused about subject/verb agreement. Look at the following sentences.

In the corner of the living room are two china dogs.

There is a stain on the carpet.

Why are Paul and Simon so tired?

In each of these sentences, the verb comes before the subject. The first step in deciding on the agreement is to find the verb in each sentence. To find the subject, ask yourself a *who* or *what* question about the sentence. For example, you might ask, “Who or what are in the corner of the living room?” The answer is *two china dogs*. Therefore, *two china dogs* is the subject of the verb. If there was only one china dog, look what would happen to the sentence.

In the corner of the living room is one china dog.

Exercise 4: Choosing the correct verb form – complication 5

Circle the subjects in each of the following sentences. Then underline the correct verb form and cross out the incorrect verb form.

1. There is/are ants on the windowsill.
2. When is/are the movies starting?
3. Under the pillow is/are a quarter.
4. In the sky is/are millions of stars.
5. There is/are 25 students in that class.
6. Why does/do the student always come late?

◆ **The subject is an indefinite pronoun like *each*, *anybody* or *both***

Most indefinite pronouns are treated as singular nouns. They include: *one*, *anyone*, *everyone*, *someone*, *nobody*, *anybody*, *everybody*, *somebody*, *nothing*, *anything*, *everything*, *something*, *each*, *either* and *neither*.

For example, we say:

Everybody is coming at 6:00.

The only indefinite pronoun that we treat as plural is *both*.

For example, we say:

Both are late for class.

Exercise 5: Choosing the correct verb form – complication 6

Circle the subjects in each of the following sentences. Then underline the correct verb form and cross out the incorrect verb form.

1. One of my friends is/are from France.
2. Everyone in my family likes/like bright colours.
3. Both of those teachers gives/give a lot of homework.
4. Each of the girls is/are wearing her best dress.
5. Nobody likes/like that restaurant.
6. Something is/are worrying them.

Exercise 6: Choosing the correct verb form - review

Circle the subjects in each of the following sentences. Then underline the correct verb form and cross out the incorrect verb form.

1. On top of the mountain is/are two small cabins.
2. Nobody lives/live in the cabins.
3. Outside one cabin, there is/are a table and some chairs.
4. Hikers often stops/stop there to eat their lunch.
5. On rainy days, hikers on their lunch break often eats/eat on the porch.

Continued from page 6

6. They love the view of the river valleys which spreads/spread in three directions.
7. From the mountain top, everyone seems/seem to see something different.
8. Paul notices/notice the sky, and Terry watches/watch the rivers' paths.
9. Both of the children likes/like to look at the houses which sits/sit on the hillsides.
10. Neither notices/notice the sky.

Proofreading for Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is an issue that should not concern you while you are writing a paragraph or essay. Instead, you should leave concerns about subject-verb agreement until the editing or proofreading stage of writing. Even good writers have subject-verb agreement problems in their writing. After they have completed a draft, they need to go back and check their writing for subject-verb agreement problems.

Exercise 7: Proofreading for subject-verb agreement errors - sentences

Circle the subjects and underline the verbs. Make an arrow from the verb to its subject. If the sentence has a subject-verb agreement error, cross out the incorrect verb and write the correct verb form above it.

Example:

Everyone are excited about the party.

1. Sara and Desmond is organizing the food.
2. Many of my classmates are arriving early to decorate the party room.
3. The party start at 8:00.
4. Each of us are bringing a small gift that cost less than \$10 for another person.

Continued from page 7

5. Mike, like many other students, have been trying to decide on the best gift to buy.
6. Mike doesn't want to get something serious; he like to make people laugh.
7. Unfortunately, all the funny things is too expensive.
8. Soo Min is making a cake, and Maria is buying some special chips.

Exercise 8: Proofreading for subject-verb agreement errors - sentences

Circle the subjects and underline the verbs. Make an arrow from the verb to its subject. If the sentence has a subject-verb agreement error, cross out the incorrect verb and write the correct verb form above it.

1. Calcium, which is one of the world's most common elements, are important for growing strong bones and teeth.
2. Every animal requires calcium for its health.
3. Calcium are also used for many other purposes.
4. As far back as Ancient Egyptian times, historians tell us of the use of calcium as a building material.
5. In nature, this important element is always found as a compound such as calcium carbonate and calcium fluoride.
6. Lack of calcium can be a serious problem.
7. Calcium-deficient bones is brittle and breaks easily.
8. Older people, especially older women, frequently gets osteoporosis.
9. Osteoporosis are a condition which cause calcium deficiency in bones.
10. In Canada, one in four women over the age of fifty suffer from osteoporosis.

Continued from page 8

11. A person with osteoporosis can break a bone doing simple daily activities like walking, hugging or coughing.
12. Each osteoporosis sufferer needs to eat foods high in calcium daily.
13. Milk, tofu and spinach is high in calcium.
14. Regular exercise also help prevent osteoporosis.
15. The other group that need lots of calcium are children who are growing.
16. They need calcium to help their bones and teeth grows strong.

Exercise 9: Proofreading for Subject-verb Agreement Errors - Paragraph

Circle the subjects and underline the verbs. Make an arrow from the verb to its subject. If the sentence has a subject-verb agreement error, cross out the incorrect verb and write the correct verb form above it.

The Columbia Icefield

The Rocky Mountains, on the border of the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, has many attractions for tourists. One attraction is the Columbia Icefield. This huge field of ancient ice cover 125 square kilometers. The Athabasca, Stutfield and Dome glaciers make up the icefield. As the ice melts, the water flow into four major river systems. These systems is the Columbia, Fraser, Mackenzie and Saskatchewan. The meltwater flows down these rivers into three different oceans, the Pacific, Arctic and Atlantic. This high point in a continent's water system is called a "hydrological apex", and the Columbia Icefield is one of only two such apexes in the world. Tourists visit the icefield from April to October each year. Walking tours and snowcoach tours is available. Many people go to the icefield because it is the biggest area of ice and snow in North America south of the Arctic Circle.

Exercise 10: Proofreading for Subject-verb Agreement Errors – Paragraph

Circle the subjects and underline the verbs. Make an arrow from the verb to its subject. If the sentence has a subject-verb agreement error, cross out the incorrect verb and write the correct verb form above it.

The Beaver

The beaver, Canada's national animal, have some unusual characteristics. One unusual fact about beavers is their large size. The beaver is the largest rodent in North America, weighing from 13 to 35 kg. It spend a lot of time in the water, so its feet is large and webbed for swimming. The beaver's tail which is wide and flat like a paddle also helps it to swim. Thick underfur keep the beaver warm and dry, even in very cold water. In fact, beavers have been known to stay under water in icy ponds for as long as fifteen minutes. Beavers also has long teeth which grows all their lives. They use these powerful teeth to cut down trees which they use for food and shelter. Another unusual fact about the beaver is that it is one of the few animals that change its own environment. Beavers create ponds by building dams with roots, sticks, mud and stones. Each family of beavers build a lodge, or nest, in a riverbank or in the middle of a pond. They build an underwater entrance to the lodge. Having the entrance underwater protects them from their enemies. Beavers is also very social animals. They not only communicate with each other by making sounds with their mouths but also by slapping their big flat tails on the water. The beaver's social life is complex and focus around the female. These very special animals are found in every province in Canada.

Exercise 11: Proofreading your own writing for Subject-verb Agreement Errors

Write a paragraph about one of the following:

- ◆ the habits of you and your friends or family members on weekends
- ◆ the appearance and habits of a wild animal
- ◆ a special place

While writing the paragraph, don't worry about subject-verb agreement. Concentrate on writing an interesting paragraph. When you have finished writing a draft of the paragraph, follow these proofreading steps for subject-verb agreement.

1. Circle the subjects and underline the verbs.
2. Make an arrow from the verb to its subject.
3. If the sentence has a subject-verb agreement error, cross out the incorrect verb and write the correct verb form above it.
4. Highlight any verbs you are not sure of. Discuss these with your tutor.

For further practice, see:

Benson, B. and Byrd, P. (1989) Improving the grammar of written English: the editing process. Boston: Heinle & Heinle. pp. 91, 93, 145.

Langan, J. and Winstanley, S. (1997) Sentence skills: a workbook for writers. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. pp. 72-79, 271-274.

Lane, J. and Lange, E. (1993). Writing clearly. Boston: Heinle and Heinle. pp. 170-177

SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT – ANSWER KEY**Exercise 1:**

1. He always ~~take~~/takes his dog.
2. The dog ~~is~~/are called Bear.
3. Bear and Peter especially ~~like~~/likes walking through the woods.
4. After their walk, they often ~~go~~/goes to the coffee shop.
5. Bear ~~sit~~/sits outside and ~~wait~~/waits while Peter ~~get~~/gets a coffee.
6. Then they ~~sit~~/sits outside and ~~watch~~/watches the people go by.
7. When Peter ~~finish~~/finishes his coffee, Bear and Peter ~~go~~/goes home.
8. At home, Bear ~~lie~~/lies down ~~have~~/has a nap, and Peter ~~leave~~/leaves for work.

Exercise 2: Choosing the correct verb form: complications 1, 2 and 3

1. The cost of (mattresses) ~~has~~/have gone up lately.
2. People often ~~forget~~/forgets the importance of free time.
3. Brown rice ~~is~~/are nutritious.
4. The homework for those classes ~~is~~/are very time-consuming.
5. The equipment in those storage rooms ~~is~~/are used by gym classes.
6. Unfortunately, many children in Mexico City ~~lives~~/live on the streets.
7. My notes from that class ~~isn't~~/aren't very hard to read.
8. Iron ~~rusts~~/rusts easily in wet weather.
9. The buildings under the bridge ~~seems~~/seem empty.
10. The students in her class ~~doesn't~~/don't like her exams.

Exercise 3: Choosing the correct verb form – complication 4

1. They ~~lives~~/live in a city which ~~has~~/have a high crime rate.
2. She ~~goes~~/go to Douglas College which ~~has~~/have three campuses.
3. John and his friend Lisa ~~eats~~/eat at a restaurant which ~~is~~/are near the skytrain station.
4. The man ~~that was~~/were in the front row is my father.
5. That movie ~~isn't~~/aren't for people who ~~scares~~/scare easily.
6. Claire and Amanda ~~shares~~/share an apartment which ~~has~~/have two bedrooms.

Exercise 4: Choosing the correct verb form – complication 5

1. There ~~is~~/are ants on the windowsill.
2. When ~~is~~/are the movies starting?
3. Under the pillow ~~is~~/are a quarter.
4. In the sky ~~is~~/are millions of stars.
5. There ~~is~~/are 25 students in that class.
6. Why ~~does~~/do the student always come late?

Exercise 5: Choosing the correct verb form – complication 6

1. One of my friends ~~is~~/are from France.
2. Everyone in my family ~~likes~~/like bright colours.
3. Both of those teachers ~~gives~~/give a lot of homework.
4. Each of the girls ~~is~~/are wearing her best dress.
5. Nobody ~~likes~~/like that restaurant.
6. Something ~~is~~/are worrying them.

Exercise 6: Choosing the correct verb form - review

1. On top of the mountain ~~is~~/are two small cabins.
2. Nobody ~~lives~~/live in the cabins.
3. Outside one cabin, there ~~is~~/are a table and some chairs.
4. Hikers often ~~stops~~/stop there to eat their lunch.
5. On rainy days hikers on their lunch break often ~~eats~~/eat on the porch.
6. They love the view of the river valleys which ~~spreads~~/spread in three directions.
7. From the mountain top, everyone ~~seems~~/seem to see something different.
8. Paul ~~notices~~/notice the sky, and Terry ~~watches~~/watch the rivers' paths.
9. Both of the children ~~likes~~/like to look at the houses which ~~sits~~/sit on the hillsides.
10. Neither ~~notices~~/notice the sky.

Exercise 7: Proofreading for subject-verb agreement errors - sentences

1. Sara and Desmond ^{are} ~~is~~ organizing the food.
2. Many of my classmates are arriving early to decorate the party room.
3. The party ^{starts} ~~start~~ at 8:00.
4. Each of us ^{is} ~~are~~ bringing a small gift that ^{costs} ~~cost~~ less than \$10 for another person.
5. Mike like many other students, ~~have~~ ^{has} been trying to decide on the best gift to buy.
6. Mike doesn't want to get something serious; he ^{likes} ~~like~~ to make people laugh.
7. Unfortunately, all the funny things ^{are} ~~is~~ too expensive.
8. Soo Min ^{is} ~~are~~ making a cake, and Maria ^{is} ~~are~~ buying some special chips.

Exercise 8: Proofreading for subject-verb agreement errors - sentences

1. Calcium, which ~~is~~ ^{is} one of the world's most common elements, ~~are~~ ^{is} important for growing strong bones and teeth.
2. Every animal ~~requires~~ ^{requires} calcium for its health.
3. Calcium ~~are~~ ^{is} also used for many other purposes.
4. As far back as Ancient Egyptian times, historians ~~tell~~ ^{tell} us of the use of calcium as a building material.
5. In nature, this important element ~~is~~ ^{is} always found as a compound such as calcium carbonate and calcium fluoride.
6. Lack of calcium ~~can be~~ ^{can be} a serious problem.
7. Calcium-deficient bones ~~is~~ ^{are} brittle and ~~breaks~~ ^{break} easily.
8. Older people, especially older women, frequently ~~gets~~ ^{get} osteoporosis.
9. Osteoporosis ~~are~~ ^{is} a condition which ~~cause~~ ^{causes} calcium deficiency in bones.
10. In Canada, one in four women over the age of fifty ~~suffer~~ ^{suffers} from osteoporosis.
11. A person with osteoporosis ~~can break~~ ^{can break} a bone doing simple daily activities like walking, hugging or coughing.
12. Each osteoporosis sufferer ~~needs~~ ^{needs} to eat foods high in calcium daily.
13. Milk, tofu and spinach ~~is~~ ^{are} high in calcium.
14. Regular exercise ~~also help~~ ^{helps} prevent osteoporosis.
15. The other group that need lots of calcium ~~are~~ ^{is} children who ~~are~~ ^{are} growing.
16. They ~~need~~ ^{need} calcium to help their bones and teeth ~~grows~~ ^{grow} strong.

Exercise 9: Proofreading for Subject-verb Agreement Errors - ParagraphThe Columbia Icefield

The Rocky Mountains, on the border of the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, ^{have} ~~has~~ many attractions for tourists. One attraction is the Columbia Icefield. This huge field of ancient ice ^{covers} ~~cover~~ 125 square kilometers. The Athabasca, Stutfield and Dome glaciers ^{make up} ~~make~~ the icefield. As the ice melts, the water ^{flows} ~~flow~~ into four major river systems. These systems ^{are} ~~is~~ the Columbia, Fraser, Mackenzie and Saskatchewan. The meltwater ^{flows} ~~flow~~ down these rivers into three different oceans, the Pacific, Arctic and Atlantic. This high point in a continent's water system ^{is called} ~~is~~ a "hydrological apex", and the Columbia Icefield ^{is} ~~are~~ one of only two such apexes in the world. Tourists ^{visit} ~~visits~~ the icefield from April to October each year. Walking tours and snowcoach tours ^{are} ~~is~~ available. Many people ^{go} ~~goes~~ to the icefield because ^{it} ~~is~~ the biggest area of ice and snow in North America south of the Arctic Circle.

Exercise 10: Proofreading for Subject-verb Agreement Errors – ParagraphThe Beaver

The beaver ^{has} ~~have~~ Canada's national animal, ^{has} ~~have~~ some unusual characteristics. One unusual fact about beavers ^{is} ~~are~~ their large size. The beaver ^{is} ~~are~~ the largest rodent in North America, weighing from 13 to 35 kg. ^{it spends} ~~it spend~~ a lot of time in the water, so ^{are} ~~is~~ its feet ^{are} ~~is~~ large and webbed for swimming. The beaver's tail ^{is} ~~are~~ which ^{is} ~~are~~ wide and flat like a paddle also ^{helps} ~~help~~ it to swim. Thick underfur ^{keeps} ~~keep~~ the beaver warm and dry, even in very cold water. In fact, beavers ^{have been known} ~~have been known~~ to stay under water in icy ponds for as long as fifteen minutes. Beavers ^{have} ~~has~~ also ^{have} ~~has~~ long teeth which ^{grow} ~~grows~~.

all their lives. They use these powerful teeth to cut down trees which they use for food and shelter. Another unusual fact about the beaver is that it is one of the few animals that change its own environment. Beavers create ponds by building dams with roots, sticks, mud and stones. Each family of beavers builds a lodge, or nest, in a riverbank or in the middle of a pond. They build an underwater entrance to the lodge. Having the entrance underwater protects them from their enemies. Beavers are also very social animals. They not only communicate with each other by making sounds with their mouths but also by slapping their big flat tails on the water. The beaver's social life is complex and focuses focus around the female. These very special animals are found in every province in Canada.