

# THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**  
STATE UNIVERSITY

# Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs are said to “agree” when they are *the same in number*. This means that singular nouns must have singular verbs and plural nouns must have plural verbs. This basic principle is easy to demonstrate:

My **brother is** a ballet dancer.

My **sisters are** airline pilots.

Difficulty arises when using words that are confusing in number (eg. everyone, all) and when phrases come between the subject and verb. To ensure subject-verb agreement, one must correctly identify the subject and verb of the sentence, and then find the form of each that will accomplish numerical agreement. The examples given below will outline and clarify this process.

## Basic Agreement

In most sentences, the noun of the subject and the verb are obvious and occur next to each other. The noun is the person, place, or thing that the sentence is “about.” The verb is the action that the subject “performs” (including “being”).

Sally (noun) loves (verb) cheesecake.

Sally is a singular noun needing a singular verb. Many singular verbs are formed by adding “-s” or “-es.”

The students love their teacher.

The students are a group of people, and most verbs are plural without “-s” or “-es.”

## Modifying Phrases

Sometimes phrases beginning with a preposition, gerund, or relative pronoun will come between the subject and the verb, obscuring the number of the noun.

The flock of birds is flying high.

The basket holding ten eggs is on the table.

The woman who sold you the watches is back.

In each of these cases, the main noun of the subject is still singular and the verb form is still the singular “is.” Always look for the word performing the sentence’s main action and assign it a singular or plural verb as appropriate.

## Special Cases

### and

If two subjects are joined by “and,” they are considered to function plurally and are given a plural verb.

The walrus and the polar bear are playing poker.

### or, nor

If two subjects are joined by “or” or “nor,” the verb should agree with the noun closest to it.

Either the teacher or the students are here.

Neither the students nor the teacher is here.

### who, whom, that, which

Relative pronouns are words — such as “who,” “whom,” “which,” and “that” — found at the beginning of phrases that modify the subject.

A book that goes unread is a writer’s worst nightmare.

That is referring to book and is part of the singular subject of the sentence.

Relative pronouns are either singular or plural depending upon the words they refer to, which are usually the subjects of the sentence. Keep the subjects in agreement with all verbs, including those in relative pronoun phrases.

### someone, somebody, each, either one, everyone, anyone

Indefinite pronouns are considered singular and require singular verbs even though sometimes they may convey plural meaning.

Anyone who wants to pursue higher education has to pass entrance exams.

### Words which may be singular or plural

Some words may be singular or plural, depending on how they are used. Be aware of how the noun is used and then assign singular or plural verbs accordingly.

The jury is sequestered.

(Here we are speaking of the jury as one entity.)

The jury are having an argument.

(Here we are speaking of the jury as a complex of individuals in opposition, and thus use plural verb.)

### Miscellaneous words

Some words look plural but are really singular or vice versa.

The news is all a lie.

The data were falsified. (data is plural; datum is singular)