

Subject-Verb Agreement

Making sure your verbs agree with your subjects is not just a question of grammatical correctness; it is a question of clarity. But to be clear, you will need to get the grammar right.

Some basic grammar

The two essential parts of a complete sentence are the subject and verb. The verb refers to the main action in a sentence, and the subject refers to the person or thing responsible for the action. Subjects can consist of a single word—a noun—but more typically they contain several words that, together, form a noun phrase: e.g., *the mood of Beethoven's late quartets* or *abnormalities in the cells governing the inflammatory response of the organism*.

The most common subject-verb agreement error

When the subject of a sentence consists of a complex noun phrase, forming the verb according to the noun directly in front of it may be tempting, but it is almost always incorrect:

- X The mood of Beethoven's late **quartets are** sombre.
- X Abnormalities in the cells governing the inflammatory response of the **organism causes** eczema.

To ensure that your verb agrees with the subject, ask yourself which single word in the subject is truly controlling the verb. *What is/are somber? What cause/causes eczema?* Almost always, this word will appear near the very beginning of the subject rather than right in front of the verb:

- √ The **mood** of Beethoven's late quartets **is** somber.
- √ **Abnormalities** in the cells governing the inflammatory response of the organism **cause** eczema.

Three special cases

1. Although we typically use the words *each*, *every*, and *everybody* to make an assertion about an entire class of people or things, in formal writing (as opposed to conversation or email) we should treat them as singular. Think of them as referring to a representative of the class:

- √ **Everybody** in the book trade—from publishers to authors to booksellers—**has felt** the impact of the rise of the ebook.

2. Form the verb according to the closest noun phrase when you use any of the following constructions: *a or b*; *either a or b*; *neither a nor b*; *not only a but also b*; *whether a or b*.

- √ Neither China's trading partners nor **China** itself **seeks** to introduce punitive tariffs.

This rule can result in sentences that don't quite sound right, even if they satisfy the conventions of grammar. Consider recasting:

- √ China's trading **partners do not seek** to introduce punitive tariffs; **China does not** either.

3. You may choose whether to treat collective nouns, such as *company*, *audience*, *army*, *committee*, or *faculty*, as singular or plural. Each of these nouns can act as a unit, but each is composed of many parts.

- √ The **audience responds** to the soliloquies of Richard III with a mixture of admiration and horror.
- √ The **committee disagree** on whether to follow up their public statement with a formal complaint.

It is more common to think of a collective noun as a coherent unit and therefore to treat it as singular, but if you want your readers to think of the noun as referring to a plurality of individuals, use the plural. In a single piece of writing, treat the noun consistently.

Practice, practice, practice

If subject-verb agreement is often an issue in your writing, allow time for a draft in which you focus exclusively on the problem. With practice, the extra draft should no longer be necessary.