

quicktips

Problem

In most academic writing, corresponding subjects and verbs are expected to “agree” with each other in person and number, e.g. *we go* vs. *he goes*. Many speakers of English do this intuitively although there are some tricky situations that require knowledge of the rules.

Generally, subject-verb agreement errors will not cause severe communication problems—your meaning will still be understood. However, if agreement errors occur throughout your paper, readers are likely to conclude that you lack proficiency in academic writing.

Solutions

UNDERSTAND THE BASIC PATTERNS

Most verbs in academic writing change only for **third person singular in the present tense**. Past tense forms are the same for all subjects (e.g. *I/you/he/we/they wrote*).

	Singular	Plural
First person	I write	We write
Second person	You write	You write
Third person	He, she, it writes ; They write	They write

The exception is the verb **be**, which has more forms than other verbs:

	Singular		Plural	
	present	past	present	past
First person	I am	I was	We are	We were
Second person	You are	You were	You are	You were
Third person	He/she/it is ; They are	He/she/it was ; They were	They are	They were

IDENTIFY CORRESPONDING SUBJECTS AND VERBS correctly so that you can check for agreement. The **subject** is the focus of the sentence—what the sentence is about. The **verb** usually expresses an action but may also describe a state of being, e.g. *is, appears, feels, has, seems*.

My next-door neighbor **mows** her yard once a week.

Who mows? my neighbor (the subject)

What does my neighbor do? mows (the verb)

Lee Airton, a Lecturer at the University of Toronto, **provides** several examples on their* website.

Who provides? Lee Airton (the subject)

What does Lee Airton do? provides (the verb)

*note that Lee Airton uses *they/them/their* gender pronouns of reference. Accordingly, if the subject of the sentence were not the proper noun Lee Airton but the singular pronoun *They*, then the corresponding verb would have no “s” ending: *Airton provides. They provide.*

PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION WHEN...

The subject and verb are separated by other words

The students in the back row of the auditorium **were** not paying attention.

The subject is delayed, after *there* + a form of *be*: *is, are, was, were, will be*

There **are** many reasons to question the findings of this study.

There **is** definitely a tendency to ignore problems.

There are multiple subjects (Use a plural verb)

Salt and pepper **add** flavor to any meal.

There are multiple verbs (*All* verbs need to agree with the subject)

That instructor **provides** clear instructions and **evaluates** papers fairly.

A sentence includes adjective pronouns: *who, which, that*

(The verb that follows these words must agree with the noun it refers to.)

The student who participates in class often **gets** a better grade.

The students who participate in class often **get** better grades.

EVEN IF YOU CORRECTLY IDENTIFY THE SUBJECT of a sentence, you may not know whether it is considered singular or plural. In these cases, refer to the rules.

- **Either/Or; Neither/Nor:** Verb tense depends on the subjects involved.

With 2 singular subjects, the verb is singular:

Neither the cathedral nor the castle **interests** me.

With 2 plural subjects, the verb is plural:

Neither the cathedrals nor the castles **interest** me.

With 1 plural and 1 singular subject, the verb agrees with the subject that is nearest to the verb:

Either my twin brothers or my sister **was** here.

Either my sister or my twin brothers **were** here.

- **Collective Nouns** (*staff, committee, audience, group, class, jury, etc.*) are usually treated as singular in American English:

As the team **rallies**, the crowd **goes** wild.

To draw attention to the individuals, a plural noun such as *members* is often added:

The team members **were** arguing vociferously with each other.

- **Indefinite Pronouns** (*anybody, anything, each, either, everyone, nobody, nor, someone, something, etc.*) usually take singular verbs:

Everybody in the study **struggles** with depression. Each subject **has** been screened.

However, the words *all, any, none* and *some* may be singular or plural, depending on the noun that follows:

Some of her writing **was** dark. Some of her poems **were** dark.

For more information:

Hacker, D. (2003). *A writer's reference* (5th ed.). Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Center for Writing. (2017, June.). *Nonbinary gender pronouns*. Retrieved from <http://writing.umn.edu/sws/quickhelp/grammar/nonbinary.html>