SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First person</strong></td>
<td>I write</td>
<td>We write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second person</strong></td>
<td>You write</td>
<td>You write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third person</strong></td>
<td>He, she, it <strong>writes</strong></td>
<td>They write</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First person</strong></td>
<td>I am</td>
<td>We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was</td>
<td>We were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second person</strong></td>
<td>You are</td>
<td>You are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You <strong>were</strong></td>
<td>You were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third person</strong></td>
<td>He/she/it <strong>is</strong></td>
<td>He/she/it <strong>was</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He/she/it <strong>was</strong></td>
<td>They were</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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** his yard once a week.

Who mows? my neighbor (the subject)
What does my neighbor do? mows (the verb)

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 of the subjects 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:**