**SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT**

The verb of a sentence must agree with the simple subject of the sentence in number and person. *Number* refers to whether a word is singular (*child*, *account*, *city*, *I*) or plural (*children*, *accounts*, *cities*, *we*). *Person* refers to whether the word denotes a speaker (*I*, *we* are *first person*), the person spoken to (*you* is *second person*), or what is spoken of (*he*, *she*, *it*, *they*; *Gary*, *college*, *taxes* are *third* *person*).

**Third person singular**Choosing verbs to agree with first and second person subjects is not usually much of a problem, but a peculiarity of third person singular verbs causes some students, especially ESL students, some confusion when working with third person singular subjects.

It matters whether a subject in the third person is singular or plural because the verb form for third person singular often differs from other verb forms. For most third person singular verbs, add an *s* to the root form of the verb: *sit*+ *s* = *sits*, the third person singular form. (Be careful-while an *s* on a noun usually denotes a plural, an *s* on a verb does not make the verb plural.) Examples of how the verb form changes in third person singular follow; notice that even irregular helping verbs (*to have*, *to be*, *to do*) add an *s -*- *has*, *is*, *was*, *does -*- in third person singular:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Third person singular (*he - she - it*) | Third person plural (*they*) |
| *sits* | *sit* |
| *is sitting* | *are sitting* |
| *was sitting* | *were sitting* |
| *has sat* | *have sat* |
| *has been sitting* | *have been sitting* |
| *does not sit* | *do not sit* |
| *doesn't sit* | don't sit |

Thus, Olivia *sits*, Phong *sits*, the college president *sits* in her office, and the remote control *sits* on the table. When Olivia and Phong get together, however, they *sit*; the college trustees *sit*.

**Only the simple subject**The verb must agree with its simple subject -- not with the description or explanation of the subject; ignore the descriptions and explanations. If the simple subject is singular, use the singular form of the verb. If the simple subject is plural, use the plural form of the verb. (For more about subjects, see the TIP Sheet Parts *of Sentences: Subject, Verb, Object, Complement*. For tips on how to use prepositional phrases to help identify the subject, see *Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases*.)

*The pink and red flowers in the tall vase****have wilted****.  
The old table that my parents gave us****needs****a coat of paint.  
The back wheels of the car you borrowed****are****wobbling.*

The verb must agree with its simple subject -- not with the subject complement. The subject and its complement are not always both singular or both plural. Even if one is singular and the other plural, the verb agrees with the subject:

*His only hobby****is****his pigeons.  
Her parents****are****her sole support.*

**Compound subjects**A compound subject joined by *and* is plural and takes a plural verb form:

*Olivia and Phong****are****looking for the remote control.* (*They are looking*.)

The verb for compound subjects joined by *or* or by (*n*)*either*...(*n*)*or* agrees with the subject nearer to the verb:

*Olivia or Phong****has****the responsibility to make the video presentation. (He has.)  
Neither Phong nor Olivia****knows****if the board will be pleased. (Sheknows.)  
The college president or the trustees****interview****all the candidates. (They interview.)  
The trustees or the president often****asks****for a second interview. (He or she asks.)*

**Relative clauses**Relative clauses begin with the relative pronouns *who*, *that*, or *which* and contain a verb separate from that of the independent clause. The verb in a relative clause agrees in person and number to the word -- the person or thing -- to which the relative pronoun refers:

Most instructors appreciate students who **ask** good questions.  
The student who **asks** a lot of questions is a valuable asset to a class.  
The logic class, which i**s** known to be difficult, nevertheless attracts a certain type of student.  
The classes, which **are** held in the fall, usually fill up fast.

**Verb preceding the subject**In questions, the subject follows the verb, but the subject still determines the person and number of the verb:

*Where in the house****are****the medicines****kept****? (They are kept.)  
Why****does****n't the soup****have****any noodles? (It does have.)  
Under which tree****do****the mushrooms****grow****? (They do grow.)*

In sentences that begin with a construction such as *here is* or *there are*, the subject follows the verb but still determines the person and number of the verb:

*Here****is****the famous flea circus. (It is here.)  
Here****are****the famous fleas. (They are here.)  
There****is****a mouse in the attic. (It is there.)  
There****are****mice in the attic. (They are there.)*

**Indefinite pronoun subjects**Some indefinite pronouns are always singular, and some are always plural. (Some can go either way; for more on indefinite pronouns, see the TIP Sheets *Pronouns* and *Pronoun* *Reference*, or see a writers' guide such as *SF Writer*.)

Some indefinite pronouns are always singular no matter how much you feel that words like *everyone* are plural. They require the third person singular verb form:

*Nobody****knows****her.****Has****anyone****asked****?  
Everyone****says****so.  
Each****gets****a ticket.  
One****uses****a hammer.  
Another****has******arrived****.*

Other indefinite pronouns are always plural and require a plural verb form:

*Several****work****here.  
Many****have done****it.  
Few****believe****it.  
Both****were****yellow.*