Chapter 7

Agreement

If you play a musical instrument, you know how one sour note can ruin an entire performance. Success depends on making all the notes flow harmoniously. The same principle applies to the sentences you write. All the parts of a sentence should work together in harmony. One ungrammatical or illogical word can sound like a sour note and jar a reader or listener. The term agreement describes two kinds of harmony that sentences must have: (1) Subjects and verbs must agree in number. (2) Pronouns must agree with their antecedents. This chapter will explain the many rules that apply in these two areas of agreement.

7.1 Subject and Verb Agreement

If you are an experienced speaker of English, you automatically make most subjects and verbs agree as you form your sentences. The process is usually quick and simple. First, you mentally identify a word as a subject. Next, you determine whether the word is singular or plural. Finally, you match the subject with a singular or plural form of a verb. Sometimes, however, the nature of the subject or the pattern of the sentence can cause you to make a mistake. When this happens, you need to slow down your mental process and consciously analyze the steps. You must also consider the number of the subjects and verbs you use.

The Number of Nouns, Pronouns, and Verbs

In English only three parts of speech can indicate number: nouns, pronouns, and verbs.

Number refers to the two forms of a word: singular and plural. Singular words indicate one; plural words indicate more than one.

Recognizing most nouns and pronouns as either singular or plural is seldom a problem. Most nouns form their plurals simply by adding -s or -es. Some, such as mouse or ox, form their plurals irregularly: mice, oxen. The singular and plural forms of pronouns are listed in Section 1.1. I, for example, is singular; we is plural.

The number of verbs affects agreement only in two areas: in the present tense and in tenses using the helping verb be. The following chart covers the first of these areas. Notice that the only change in form occurs in the third-person singular column, where an -s or -es is added to the base form of the verb.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR AND PLURAL VERBS IN THE PRESENT TENSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First and Second Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I, you) behave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I, you) try</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next chart illustrates those forms of the helping verb be that change form depending on whether they are singular or plural. The other forms of be rarely cause problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE HELPING VERB BE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I) am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(he, she, it) is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I, he, she, it) was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(he, she, it) has been</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distinguishing between the singular and plural forms of nouns, pronouns, and verbs is the first step in avoiding errors in agreement.

EXERCISE A: Determining the Number of Nouns, Pronouns, and Verbs. For each of the following items, write whether the noun
or pronoun is singular or plural. Then choose the verb from the
choices in parentheses that agrees in number with the noun or
pronoun.

Example: meat (roasts, roast)  
singular roasts  
1. volcano (explodes, explode)  
2. hands (shakes, shake)  
3. ivy (grows, grow)  
4. walls (is crumbling, are crumbling)  
5. meteorite (flashes, flash)  
6. harmonica (plays, play)  
7. vitamins (fortifies, fortify)  
8. memories (was rushing, were rushing)  
9. puddles (is, are)  
10. we (laughs, laugh)

Agreement with Singular and Plural Subjects

Two general rules of subject and verb agreement cover all
of the more specific rules.

A singular subject must have a singular verb.

A plural subject must have a plural verb.

In the following examples, subjects are underlined once,
verbs twice.

Singular Subject and Verb: Jeremy craves affection.  
She was being coy.

Plural Subject and Verb: These boys crave affection.  
They were being coy.

Intervening Phrases and Clauses. When a sentence con-
tains a phrase or clause that separates the subject from its
verb, simply ignore the intervening group of words when you
check for agreement.

A phrase or clause that comes between a subject and its verb
does not affect subject-verb agreement.

Notice in the following examples that the intervening
words have no effect on the subject-verb agreement. In the
first, the singular subject, decision, agrees with a singular verb,
is, despite the intervening phrase. In the second, the plural
subject agrees with a plural verb despite the intervening
clause.

Examples: The decision of the legislators is final.
The families whose town was flooded during the hurri-
cane require temporary shelter.

Intervening parenthetical expressions, such as those begin-
ning with as well as, in addition to, in spite of, or including, also
have no effect on subject-verb agreement. Such expressions are
usually set off by commas or other punctuation.

Example: Your information, in addition to the data gathered by the
computer, is helping to solve the problem.

Relative Pronouns as Subjects. When who, which, or that
acts as the subject in a subordinate clause, its verb will be sin-
gular or plural depending on the number of the pronoun’s
antecedent.

The antecedent of a relative pronoun affects the pronoun’s
number and determines its agreement with a verb.

In the first of the following examples, the antecedent for
who is one; therefore, the verb, has, is singular because one is
singular. In the second example, the antecedent of who is can-
idates; the verb have is plural because candidates is plural.

Examples: Chuck is the only one of those candidates who has prior
experience in government.  
Chuck is just one of several candidates who have prior ex-
perience in government.

Study these two examples carefully, noting the distinction
in meaning. In the first example, Chuck ("the one") stands out
from the larger group of candidates; the basic meaning of the
sentence is “Chuck is the only one who has experience.” In the
second example, however, the subordinate clause refers to the
group, not to the individual: All of the candidates have experience.

**EXERCISE B**: Making Singular and Plural Subjects Agree with Their Verbs. Write the subject from each of the following sentences and then choose the correct verb from the choices in parentheses. Write S if the subject is singular and P if it is plural.

1. Her powerful grip (results, result) from lifting and carrying.
2. A gravel driveway (provides, provide) better traction.
3. Dark blue (goes, go) well with most other colors.
4. Seen through a microscope, the snowflake’s lacy pattern (fills, fill) us with wonder.
5. They sometimes (provokes, provoke) me to anger.
7. His cellar (hides, hide) a dreadful secret.
8. Most kitchen countertops (is, are) laminated plastic.
9. These wallpaper designs (is, are) reproduced in miniature.
10. Australia (was, were) the original home of this wombat.

**EXERCISE C**: Making Subjects and Verbs Separated by Phrases and Clauses Agree. Write the subject from each of the following sentences and then choose the correct verb from the choices in parentheses.

1. Acupuncture, a medical procedure that comes to us from the Chinese, (is, are) receiving greater attention.
2. In the park a crumbling pavilion used for concerts (evokes, evoke) memories of the past.
3. Turpentine, derived from coniferous trees, (is, are) used to clean messy paint spills.
4. This casserole, which is made with beef and various vegetables, (serves, serve) six people.
5. Her only piece of jewelry, an unusual pendant made with tiny seashells, (is, are) hanging from her neck.
6. This daguerreotype, as well as those on the far wall, (was, were) among the first ever made.
7. These easy exercises, along with the one described in that book, (is, are) designed to relax you.
8. During this crisis, his ability to deal with problems (seems, seem) to be crumbling.
9. The houses built on the beach (needs, need) firmer foundations.
10. Dairy products, such as cream or butter, (causes, cause) food to spoil quickly in warm weather.
11. Senior citizens from all over the county (has, have) come here to protest the rising cost of living.

12. The wax pears, arranged in a bowl, (fools, fool) people every time.
13. Ants carrying tiny burdens on their backs (struggles, struggle) back to the colony.
14. My uncle, who is as eccentric as anyone you might know, (talks, talk) incessantly.
15. A fledgling with two anxious parents (has, have) been trying to return to the nest all morning.
16. The debate to be shown on several television stations this evening (is, are) worth seeing.
17. The total, equaling the money in the cash register plus the credit slips, (is, are) two thousand dollars exactly.
18. Walter’s mule, a mean animal that bites anyone who comes too close, always (brays, bray) a warning.
19. This slice of bread with mold growing on its sides (was, were) lying in the bottom of the bread drawer.
20. A bear with two cubs (has, have) been seen near the mouth of the river.

**EXERCISE D**: Making Relative Pronouns Agree with Their Verbs. Divide your paper into four columns and label them Relative Pronoun, Antecedent, Number, and Verb. Then fill in the information from each of the following sentences, choosing the correct verb from the choices in parentheses.

1. These games of chance, which often (costs, cost) naive players a fortune, will be investigated by the district attorney.
2. Brandy is the only one out of the twenty dogs (ignores, ignore) every command.
3. The orchestra will play a medley of songs that (appeals, appeal) to most audiences.
4. Jeanette is the strongest of the survivors who (was, were) trapped in the cave.
5. This is one of those practical jokes that (hurts, hurt) everyone involved.
6. Buy some outfits, whatever you like, that (makes, make) you look slim.
7. Only a basic understanding of the sciences that (is, are) taught in junior high school is needed for this course.
8. One of the chemicals that (was, were) found in the river comes from two different sources.
9. Dr. Cooper is one of those rare general practitioners who willingly (makes, make) house calls.
10. The collection of poems, which (was, were) not favorably reviewed in many literary journals, won two awards nevertheless.