

## SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

### Finding the Subject and the Verb

The subject in a sentence names the person or thing performing the action expressed in the predicate (= the verb, verbs, or verb phrases), which describes the action.

An easy trick to find the verb(s) in a sentence is to change the tense in the sentence. The verb(s) will change if you do this, but nothing else will.

Jean works at the grocery store. She stocks shelves, works the cash register, and helps the manager lock up at night. (present tense)

Last year, Jean worked at the grocery store. She stocked shelves, worked the cash register, and helped the manager lock up at night. (past tense)

To find the subject, you simply ask “who or what performs the action?” In the above example, who works at the store, stocks shelves, and helps the manager? Jean – so there is the subject.

- **In English, verbs take the same form for all persons with one exception: the third person singular in the present tense. For all subjects that can be replaced with *he, she, or it*, you need to add *-s* to the verb in the present tense. If the verb is “to be,” use the form *is* or *was*.**

Singular

*I am poor. I work two jobs.*

*You are poor. You work two jobs.*

*He/she/it is poor. He/she works two jobs.*

Plural

*We are poor. We work two jobs.*

*You are poor. You work two jobs.*

*They are poor. They work two jobs.*

- **Different subjects joined by “and” (= compound subjects) are nearly always plural:**  
*Scarlett and Melanie nurse the injured soldiers. Melanie’s natural ability and her desire to help others have inspired her charity work.*  
**Exception:** When the parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person or thing.  
*Ice cream and cake is my favorite snack (single unit). My husband and best friend encourages me to go back to school (husband & friend is the same person).*
- **⚠\*Watch out: Phrases beginning with *as well as, in addition to, accompanied by, together with, and along with* do not make a singular subject plural! Yes, they mean the same as “and,” but they are different (note that these phrases are set off by commas as well!)**  
*Rhett Butler, as well as other young Southern men, serves the Confederacy.*
- **With compound subjects connected by (*either*) or or (*neither*) nor, make the verb agree with the part of the subject closer to the verb.**  
*Atlanta or Tara plantation is Scarlett O’Hara’s residence.*  
*A parasol or two lace handkerchiefs are going to be her Christmas present to her mother.*  
*A runaway soldier or a beggar is equally turned away at the door.*  
*Neither Scarlett nor her girlfriends are happy that all the young men go off to war.*
- **Indefinite pronouns like *each, every, everybody, everyone, anyone, somebody, one (of), no one, nobody* take a singular verb.**  
*Everybody knows Gone with the Wind.*  
*Although many have tried, nobody has ever created a Southern Belle character like Scarlett.*  
*All are welcome at Tara plantation as long as they show good manners.*

*All, most, a lot of* are take a plural verb if they go with count nouns (*All fans of Gone With the Wind have seen the movie several times.*); they take a singular verb with non-count nouns (*Most of the praise for the movie goes to the actors’ performances*) **Many** is always plural; it cannot be used with non-count nouns.

- **Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a group of words (often a prepositional phrase) that comes between. Never look for the subject of a sentence in a prepositional phrase!**  
*The girls in the O'Hara family **are** beautiful. A good set of pearls **costs** a lot of money.*
- **Make a verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb. This goes especially for sentences beginning with *there is* or *there are*.**  
*There **is** a young man at the door. Do let him in!*  
*At the back to the ballroom room **are** the chaperones and the elderly ladies.*
- **Collective nouns, such *jury, committee, audience, crowd, team*, refer to a group of people (or things). If the writer wants to emphasize that the whole group is acting as a single unit, the noun takes a singular verb. However, if the writer wants to emphasize that the different members of the group act independently, the noun takes a plural verb.**  
*The Wilkes family **lives** near Tara plantation. (single unit)*  
*The group of young men around the fireplace **turn** around when Scarlett enters. (the group members act independently)*
- **Some words—such as *civics, mathematics, economics*—have a plural ending, but they are thought of as single units and thus take singular verbs.**  
*Economics **is** a subject Scarlett knows nothing about until she has to run the plantation after the war.*  
*Measles **was** a serious illness in Scarlett's day.*  
Exception: The following list of words, even though they refer to a single unit, take plural verbs: *jeans, scissors, clippers, eyeglasses, shears, thanks, riches*.  
*Designer jeans **were** not fashionable in Atlanta during the Civil War. Thanks **are** necessary when somebody invites a lady to a ball.*
- **For titles of written works, names of companies, and quotations use singular verbs.**  
*Gone With the Wind **is** my favorite book.*  
*Barnes and Nobles **is** opening a new store in my neighborhood.*  
*"I will never be hungry again!" **is** Scarlett's motto after the war.*
- **In sentences that have "to be" as their main verb, make the verb agree with the grammatical subject of the sentence (which, in this case, always comes before the verb), not with its subject complement.**  
*White gloves and pearls **are** the standard equipment of a Southern Belle.*  
*The standard equipment of a Southern Belle **is** white gloves and pearls.*
- **When a whole clause or phrase is the subject, use a singular verb.**  
*What I want to know **is** whether Rhett and Scarlett will ever be together again .*  
*Saving money **is** an art the young Scarlett has no use for.*  
*To avoid boredom **is** her biggest goal when she is a girl.*
- **Relative clauses (clauses beginning with *who, which, or that*) agree with the noun they follow, the noun they describe more closely.**  
*For her service in the Atlanta military hospital, the women wear clothes that **travel** well and don't show dirt.*  
*If you are confused about the moral ambiguity of the nove , ask the professor who **teaches** the subject, not me.*

► Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.