



FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Subject-verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement means the verb must match its subject in number. A singular subject takes a singular verb (she works), and a plural subject takes a plural verb (they work). The main difficulty is finding the real subject when other words come between it and the verb.

What to know

The basic rule

In the present simple, the verb changes only for the third person singular. Add -s or -es when the subject is he, she, it, or a singular noun: The student works, the city grows, the teacher teaches. With I, you, we, they and plural nouns, use the base form: The students work.

- *He works in a bank.* · *They work in a bank.*
- *The city has a new park.* · *The cities have new parks.*

Find the real subject

Most mistakes happen because words come between the subject and the verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not with the nearest noun. In *The quality of the roads has improved*, the subject is quality, so we use has. In *The students in my class are friendly*, the subject is students, so we use are.

Special cases that cause errors

Some subjects look plural but take a singular verb. Everyone, everybody, everything, each, every, someone, nobody and no one are all singular: *Everyone in the class speaks English.* Each of the students has a laptop. Uncountable nouns also take a singular verb: *The information is useful.* News and economics are singular too.

- Singular: everyone, each, every, nobody, someone, news, information
- Plural: people, police, the poor, both, several, many
- Singular: the number of, one of the, the amount of
- Plural: a number of, a lot of students, two of the

There is and there are

In sentences that begin with there, the verb agrees with the noun that comes after it: *There is a problem.* *There are several problems.* In speech, people often say *There's* for both, but in writing, keep the agreement. With a list, speakers often match the verb to the first item, as in *There is a bus and a train.* In formal writing, the safest choice is to rephrase so that the subject comes first: *A bus and a train are available.*

Mistakes to avoid

The classic mistakes are leaving out the third person -s (*She work in a bank*), adding -s to a plural subject (*The students works hard*), and matching the verb to the nearest noun (*The cost of these courses are high*). Another is using a plural verb with an uncountable noun (*The news are bad*).

Exercises

1. The quality of the roads _____ improved.
 - a. have
 - b. has
 - c. are
2. Each of the students _____ a laptop.
 - a. has
 - b. have
 - c. are having
3. There _____ several reasons for this change.
 - a. was
 - b. are
 - c. is
4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The number of (2) cars on the road (3) are increasing (4) every year.
5. Begin with One. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): work / my friends / works / in a hospital. / One of
6. Correct this: *My parents works in a bank.*
7. Neither the teacher nor the students _____ the answer.
 - a. know
 - b. is knowing
 - c. knows
8. Everyone in my class _____ English every day.
 - a. are speaking
 - b. speaks
 - c. speak
9. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) People who live (2) in cities (3) often has (4) less space.
10. The news about the exam results _____ good.
 - a. was
 - b. were
 - c. are

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/subject-verb-agreement/practice/

IELTS tip. In Writing Task 2, check the verb in every long sentence by finding the real subject and ignoring the phrase between the subject and the verb. In Speaking, pay special attention to he, she,

it and singular nouns in the present simple, and to there is and there are.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Subject-verb agreement

AIM	Learners match verbs to subjects in long sentences and in the tricky cases that appear in IELTS.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Write The number of cars on our roads ___ increasing on the board with a gap and ask learners to choose is or are. Discuss why the nearest noun misleads.

Lesson steps

1. Teach the cross-out method with five long sentences. Learners cross out the interrupting phrase and name the subject.
2. Introduce the special cases in a table: each, every, everyone, news, the number of, a number of, either ... or, neither ... nor.
3. Learners complete a gap-fill of twelve sentences, then explain their choices in pairs.
4. Learners check one paragraph of their own writing by listing every subject and its verb.

Extension

Record learners answering a Part 2 question, transcribe a short section, and mark every third person verb.

Answer key

1. b) has. The subject is quality, which is singular. Of the roads is a phrase that does not control the verb.
2. a) has. Each is singular, so the verb is has.
3. b) are. The noun after there is reasons, which is plural, and the sentence is in the present.
4. Part 3: *are increasing* → **is increasing**. The number of takes a singular verb.
5. One of my friends works in a hospital. The subject is one, which is singular, so works is correct.
6. My parents work in a bank. Parents is plural, so the present simple verb has no s.
7. a) know. With neither ... nor, the verb agrees with the nearer subject, students, which is plural.
8. b) speaks. Everyone is singular, so the present simple verb takes s.
9. Part 3: *often has* → **often have**. People is plural, so the verb is have.
10. a) was. News is singular, so the past form is was.

Questions learners often ask

What is subject-verb agreement? It means the verb form must match whether the subject is singular or plural. In the present simple, a third person singular subject takes -s.

Is the number of singular or plural? The number of takes a singular verb. A number of means several and takes a plural verb.

Do collective nouns like government take a singular or plural verb? In British English, both can be used, depending on whether you think of the group as one unit or as many people. Keep your choice consistent within a paragraph.

How can I find the subject of a long sentence? Cross out phrases beginning with of, in or who, then find the noun left before the verb.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999). Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Longman.

Written by Will Salisbury · IELTS Laboratory · ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/subject-verb-agreement · Free to copy for classroom use.