

Agreement Errors

(The material for this handout was taken from the Writing Center at Texas A&M and *Simon & Shuster Handbook for Writers*, 2009, pp. 356-7)

Subject-Verb Agreement:

A singular subject must have a singular verb (usually by adding –s or –es in the third person):

Incorrect: My mother *wash* the dishes.

Correct: My mother *washes* the dishes.

A plural subject must have a plural verb (without the –s or –es in the third person)

Incorrect: The boys *plays* ball in the backyard.

Correct: The boys *play* ball in the backyard.

This is easy enough but things get tricky when phrases get between the subject and the verb:

Incorrect: The mother, along with her three children, are sick.

Correct: The mother, along with her three children, is sick.

Incorrect: The woman wearing the red socks are very nice.

Correct: The woman wearing the red socks is very nice.

In the “Incorrect” examples above, the object of a phrase is confused for the subject of the sentence. Be sure to locate the subject of a sentence so that you can make the verb agree with it.

When subjects are joined by *and*, they create a compound subject which takes a plural verb.

Example: The student and the instructor *work* long hours

The exception to this rule is when *and* joins subjects that refer to a single thing or person:

Example: My friend and neighbor *makes* excellent chili.

Example: Macaroni and cheese *contains* many calories.

When subjects are joined by *or*, or by sets such as, *either ... or*, *neither ... nor*, and *not only ... but (also)*, the verb agrees with the subject closest to it.

Example: Neither spiders nor *flies* upset me.

Example: Not only spiders but also all other *arachnids* have four pairs of legs.

Example: A dinner of six clam fritters, four blue crabs, or one steamed *lobster* sounds good.

Noun-Pronoun Agreement:

Pronouns are words like: he, she, it, they, his, hers, their, theirs, it, its. They take the place of nouns. They also refer back to a noun (i.e., the antecedent). The following is the conjugation of the third-person pronoun.

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
Subject:	he/she/it	they
Object:	him/her/it	them
Possessive:	his/hers/its	their/theirs

Singular: The *boy* practices every day so that *he* can become a good tennis player.

Plural: The *boys* practice every day so that *they* can win the championship.

These examples show the pronoun agreeing with its antecedent in number. They also show the pronoun used in the subjective (nominative) case in the clauses in which they occur.

Singular: Sally wore a red dress. *She* wore *it* every day.

In the example above, the feminine subjective pronoun (“she”) is used in the second sentence, the antecedent of which is Sally. “It” is in the objective (accusative) case and corresponds to the dress (antecedent). If we were using the plural (“Sally wore red dresses”), the corresponding objective pronoun would be “them” (“She wore *them* every day”).

Possessives: The coat was *hers*. The mittens were *his*. The closet was *theirs*.
The building was in the gothic style; *its* gargoyles were horrifying.
The buildings were in the gothic style; *their* gargoyles were horrifying

In these examples, the singular and plural possessives are clearly seen. Note that in the second sentence, “its” does not have an apostrophe – “its” is not “it’s,” which is the contraction for “it is.” As for the first sentence, you might be thinking that one could just as well say, “Her coat,” or “His mittens,” or “Their closet,” which is true, but then “her,” “his,” and “their” would be possessive (limiting) adjectives rather than pronouns.

Collective Nouns:

A word that refers to each individual in a group (e.g., everybody, everyone, each) takes a singular verb and singular pronoun.

Example: *Everyone* in this store *is buying* chips.

Example: *Everybody* *needs* to bring *his* or *her* book to the meeting.

A word that refers to individuals as one group (e.g., committee, faculty, staff) takes a singular verb and singular pronoun.

Example: The committee *is making* a decision.

A word that refers to a group of individuals (e.g., all, some) takes a plural verb and plural pronoun.

Example: *Some* people *are going* to the movies.

Example: *All* people *listen* to *their* own type of music.