

LESSON 1

Subject-Verb Agreement (Singular-Plural)

If I was only allowed to teach ONE grammar rule to any SAT or ACT prep student, this is the one I would pick.

The name may be long, but it's also perfect: "Subject-Verb Agreement (Singular-Plural)" - which I will often abbreviate as "**Subject-Verb Agreement**" for the rest of this book. This rule is about *agreement* between an essential pair of words that every sentence needs: **a subject** and **a main verb**.

Every single sentence in English contains a subject and a main verb, so you can imagine why this rule is so important.

What do the Subject and Main Verb have to "agree" on? That's whether they are *singular* or *plural* - "one" or "many". The subject and main verb must both agree upon this.

A singular subject needs a singular verb. Plural subject, plural verb. It's a very basic concept that can be dressed up in all sorts of creative and challenging ways.

Let's look at a simple sentence:

"Sam walks to the beach."

The "Subject" is the main character; in this case, "Sam." The main verb is "walks," which is the primary action that the subject is doing.

This sentence sounds fine, but what if we alter our sentence to:

"Sam *walk* to the beach."

Sounds pretty terrible, doesn't it?

Your ears know that a singular/plural error has happened. They just *know*!

In grammar-speak, here's what went wrong. "Sam" is singular noun – *one* person. However, "*walk*" is a plural verb, so they don't match up. "*Walks*," on the other hand, was singular, which is why the original sentence sounded perfectly fine.

A Helpful Test

If you can't tell the difference between singular and plural verbs, use "He blanks, they blank.":

Test the sentence in your mind with both "he/she" and "they." You'd say "he *walks*, they *walk*." Your inner ear *will* know which way is correct.

Is "swims" a singular or plural word? Try the test: "he *swims*, they *swim*." Since "swims" sounds right when matched with the singular "he," we know that "swims" is a singular verb.

Is "jump" a singular or plural verb? "He jumps, they jump": it's plural, because it sounds right when matched with the plural "they."

Is "falls" singular or plural? How about "whistle"? (singular: "he falls," then plural: "they whistle.")

I use this simple test throughout the SAT & ACT to help me figure out if a word is singular or plural.

Telling the Difference Between Singular & Plural Nouns

You shouldn't have much trouble determining if most nouns are singular or plural. However, there are some "tricky" nouns that the SAT & ACT use to trap unwary students. Here are some examples:

Tricky words that may sound plural, but are actually singular:

- Everyone
- Team
- Country
- The whole business
- The group
- The team
- Pack (of dogs)
- School (of fish)

All of these words are SINGULAR – just one team, just one school of fish, etc. – *even though we know that they are made up of many people or animals*. The SAT will try to trick you like this:

"The entire team are packing their bags and going back home."

In the above example, the question is trying to exploit confusion you may have about whether "team" is singular or plural. Remember that we're talking about just *one* team, even though it's made up of many players. Therefore the main verb should use the singular, and read:

"The entire team *is* packing its bags and going back home."

Identifying “Compound” Plural Subjects

Sentences can include what I call “compound” plural subjects. This is when multiple singular nouns combine to form one plural subject. For example:

“Sam and Bally walk to the beach.”

Now, even though both “Sam” and “Bally” are singular, they have been glued together with the conjunction “and.” From now on, the sentence will be talking about both of these people *together*, and two people make a *plural* subject. That’s why this sentence uses the plural verb “walk,” not the singular “walks.”

If you didn’t pay attention to the “*Sam and*” at the beginning of the sentence, you would only focus on “*Bally walk* to the beach.” That would sound wrong to you, and you’d probably change “walk” to the singular verb form, like so:

“...Bally *walks* to the beach.”

Now this *small section* of the sentence sounds good, but if you plugged it back in and suddenly noticed “Sam and” at the beginning of the sentence, you’d realize the Subject-Verb Agreement was now wrong!

The SAT & ACT exploit this compound-subject trick by inserting giant piles of steaming distraction in the middle of sentences (that’s why you apply Prelesson B on **Eliminating Details!**)

Here’s an example, based on our previous sentence. My alterations won’t change anything about the basic structure of the sentence “Sam and Bally walk to the beach.” I’m just adding bunch of junk details to distract you from the compound plural subject “Sam and Bally”:

“Sam, who had kept in touch with her old friend for some time (even after leaving Florida), and, alongside her, her friend Bally, walk amidst the butterflies to the isolated beach.”

WHEW. Now that sentence looks *awful*.

Doesn’t it sound wrong if you only focus narrowly on the portion “alongside her, her friend Bally, walk amidst the butterflies”? Your ear will prefer the singular form “Bally *walks* amidst the butterflies.” Resist that temptation, because really, there’s still a compound plural subject and verb: “Sam and Bally (compound plural) *walk*.”

This is a sentence where **Eliminating Detail** will really bust through the fog. We can safely ignore everything except a small portion of our original sentence: “Sam and Bally walk.”

Catching Compound Plural Subjects: Imagine the Action

Another tactic that helps me catch these mistakes is to actually visualize the sentence taking place in my head. Is *one* thing doing the action (singular), or are *two or more* nouns involved (plural)? Mentally picturing the sentence will often help answer this question.

A few more examples of compound plural subjects:

- “They and I”
- “The seagull, the raven, and the dove”
- “The cat, sitting in the meadow, and the dog, jumping at the gate” (There are two animals. Get rid of details and you have “The cat and the dog.”)
- My brother, who is often found designing video games, my father, who loves his classic cars, and my mother, who enjoys reading about philosophy” (There are three people. Get rid of the details and you have “My brother, my father, and my mother”)

Identifying “Trick” Compound Subjects

Occasionally, a sentence may appear to you at first to be a compound plural subject, but when you eliminate unessential details, it turns out to be singular, not compound. Here’s an example:

The dog, along with his many canine friends, jumps in the water.

Looking at this sentence, it would seem that “many” dogs (plural) are jumping in the water. That is, in fact, what is being described, but *grammatically*, the subject and verb of this sentence are still singular.

That’s because “along with his many canine friends” is a nonessential modifying phrase (you’ll learn to call this a “Parenthetical Clause” in Lesson 9 on **Sentence Structure**). It’s attached to “the dog,” but this phrase is not essential to the structure of the sentence. You can eliminate details and reduce the sentence to “The dog jumps in the water,” which is entirely singular.

It’s not part of a compound subject in the same way that “The dog *and his many friends* jump in the water” would be. In this latter case, it would most definitely be a compound plural subject and plural verb.

Continually use elimination of details to discover the essential structure of each sentence, then properly match singular and plural to ensure that Subjects and Verbs can agree.

Subject-Verb Agreement Quick Reference

- Singular subjects go with singular verbs. Plural subjects go with plural verbs. This is the among the most common topics on the SAT & ACT Grammar sections.
- Use the test “he blanks / they blank” (e.g. “he *runs* / they *run*”) and trust your ear to determine if a verb is singular or plural.
- Eliminate details and use your logic to decide if the subject is singular or plural.
- Remember that some words might sound plural, but are really *singular collective groups*, like “the entire company” or “the whole country.”
- Compound plural subjects are plural because they are made of multiple singular subjects.
- Sometimes, a nonessential descriptive clause can seem like part of a compound plural subject at first - but nonessential clauses will never count towards the main subject, so exclude them. Study Parenthetical Clauses in Lesson 9 on **Sentence Structure**.

OK, let’s look at some questions from the Pretest:

Our football team, currently in the running for the championship, and our school tennis star, who has dominated her recent matches, is putting us in the running for a record season this year.

- (A) [NO CHANGE]
- (B) matches, was putting us
- (C) matches, are putting us
- (D) matches, were putting us

OK – You should see the main verb “*is*” underlined and already be thinking, “what could go wrong here?” Well, one common possibility is a Subject-Verb Disagreement error...

So, ask yourself “*who* or *what* is putting the school in the running for a record season”? According to the sentence, that’s *both* the football team *and* the school tennis star.

Since we're talking about *both* a team and a person, we have a *compound plural* subject, and our main verb needs to be plural as well. However, in the sentence, the main verb "is" is currently singular. That's our classic Subject-Verb Agreement mistake: a *plural* subject (football team *and* tennis star) mistakenly matched to a *singular* verb form ("is" instead of "are.") The subject and verb don't *agree* on whether they should be singular or plural.

This eliminates both "singular verb" answer choices, which are Choice A ("is") and Choice B ("was"). Looking at our remaining options, they are both plural verbs ("are" and "were") but they have different **Verb Tenses** (see the next Lesson for more info). Looking at the timeframe of the sentence, it's more likely that we should stay with present tense (notice the clue words "currently," "recent," and "this year"). **Choice C is the correct answer**, because it's both *plural* and *present tense*.

Here's another example from the Pretest:

Joseph Wharton, along with his many successful business ventures, has helped shape the history of American industry.

- (A) [NO CHANGE]
- (B) Wharton and his many successful business ventures has
- (C) Wharton, including his many successful business ventures, have
- (D) Wharton, along with his many successful business ventures, have

This is an example of a "trick" compound subject. It might look like "Joseph Wharton" *and* "his successful business ventures" are the subject of the original sentence, but it's *just Joseph Wharton* that counts. As usual, stuff set between two commas is just unimportant detail - a Parenthetical Clause (see Prelesson B on **Removing Details** and Lesson 9 on **Sentence Structure**). Take this portion out of the sentence to simplify it, and you'll be left with "Joseph Wharton *has* helped shape..."

Your ears should tell you that's correct, but you could also test like this: Is "Joseph Wharton" singular or plural? One person, so singular. But is the verb "*has*" singular or plural? Test by saying to yourself, "He *has*, he *have*." Which one sounds correct? The first, *singular* version.

"Has" is singular, so it's correctly matched with the singular subject "Joseph Wharton." That means Choice A, "No Change," is quite possibly correct.

Choice B drops the commas around "business ventures," making that middle section equal in importance to the subject "Joseph Wharton" - this creates the compound plural subject "Wharton *and* his ventures..." Now the subject really *is* plural, so the singular verb form "has" suddenly creates a singular-plural disagreement.

Choice C uses the plural verb “have,” which disagrees with the singular subject “Joseph Wharton.” It’s also an example of a **Misplaced Modifier** error (Lesson 11). The descriptive phrase “including his business ventures” doesn’t make sense here, because this phrase is modifying “Joseph Wharton,” but a *person* can’t contain or “include” business ventures. Read Lesson 11 on Misplaced Modifiers for more info and practice.

Choice D again puts the middle section back into commas, creating a Parenthetical Clause as in Choice A. This means the subject of the sentence remains Joseph Wharton (singular), but this answer choice uses the *plural* verb form “have,” creating a Singular-Plural Disagreement error again.

After evaluating our options, **Choice A is correct** and all the other answer choices are wrong!