# Subject-Verb Agreement

## Most papers for college are written in a dialect that no one actually speaks; it’s called Academic Edited American English. Different world Englishes have their own logical systems for how subjects and verbs fit together. In Academic Edited American English, the subject and verb of a clause should match in terms of number. The conventions below are intended to support students in producing writing that hews to the guidelines of Academic Edited American English.

## What is subject-verb agreement?

Subject-verb agreement requires the subject (noun) to agree in number and person with the verb. So if the subject of a sentence is singular, the verb must be singular. If the subject of a sentence is plural, the verb must be plural.

## Step one: Identify the subject

In any sentence, the subject is the noun or pronoun referring to the person or thing that performs an action.

Example: The disdainful **badger** eats eggs. (“Badger” is the subject, because it is the one that performs the action of eating.)

Be careful not to confuse the subject with its complement. A complement is a word that renames or describes the subject.

Example: Her biggest **fear** is spiders. (“Fear” is the subject, so the verb needs to be singular. The word “spiders” is the complement.)

Sometimes the subject comes after the verb. (This situation is particularly common in sentences that start with “there is” or “there are.”)

Example: There is a **cat** on the windowsill.

Don’t be misled by phrases that come between the subject and the verb.

Example: The **professor**, as well as all of her students, is looking forward to the weekend. (“Professor,” and not “students” is the subject in this sentence.)

## Step two: Identify the subject’s person and number

### Determine the subject’s person.

First person – I am (also first person plural: We are)

Second person – You are

Third person – She/He/It (or anything other than “I” or “you”) is (also third person plural: They are)

### Determine if the subject is singular or plural.

Singular: I am the badger is

Plural: We are the badgers are

### Some tricky subjects:

Compound subjects (those connected by “and”) are considered plural.

Example: **Kate and Jonathan** are working on their writing.

When two subjects are joined by “or” or “nor,” the verb should agree with the subject closer to it.

Example: Neither Amy nor **the badgers** are going to the dance. But… Neither the badgers nor **Amy** is going to the dance.

Titles, company names, and words mentioned as words are singular.

Examples:

***Gangs of New York*** is a movie set in the nineteenth-century.

**Einstein Brothers** sells bagels.

**“Cacti”** is the plural form of cactus.

Indefinite pronouns (words like “everyone,” “each,” “nobody,” and “anything”) are usually singular.

Examples:

**Anything** can happen on February 29th.

**Everyone** needs a hug sometimes.

Gerund phrases (phrases where an –ing verb is functioning as a noun and is followed by a noun or adjective) and noun clauses (phrases that behave like nouns) are usually treated as singular.

Examples:

**Turning orange** is a side effect of eating too many carrots. (“Turning orange” is a gerund phrase, and “is” is the verb.)

**That the badgers won the election** amazes me. (“That the badgers won the election” is a noun clause and “amazes” is the verb.)

## Step three: Make the number and person of the verb match those of the subject

## Sources:

Hacker, Diana. *A Writer’s Reference*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003.

Rosa, Alfred and Paul Eschholz. *The Writer’s Brief Handbook*. 4th ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2002.