

SEM Education Winter Session

Subject-Verb Agreement

You know how you have to conjugate the verb to match the subject in foreign languages? We have the same thing in English, and it can get tricky even though the simple cases seem so natural and obvious to us:

Example 1	
Wrong:	You is smart.
Correct:	You are smart.
Example 2	
Wrong:	Everyday the alarm clock goes off and we wakes up to confront our lives.
Correct:	Everyday the alarm clock goes off and we wake up to confront our lives.

The subject is a noun (person, place, or thing) that is the "doer" or "main feature" in the sentence. A verb is an action word. Think about the simple sentences above and how awkward it would be to have verbs that don't agree with the subject. You don't even have to know what the subject and verb of each sentence is to know that it's awkward. Now the SAT won't make it that easy on you; they'll intentionally try to trick your ear. Let's do an example:

Investigations into the scandal (*shows/show*) a lot more than we want to know.

To pick the right verb, we must first find the subject. Let's start by applying what we learned in a previous chapter and cross out the prepositional phrases:

Investigations (*shows/show*) a lot more than we want to know.

What's left is the subject—investigations! Now the second step is to ask yourself whether *investigations* is singular or plural. Well, it's plural because of the *s*, meaning there's more than one. Therefore, we need the plural verb *show*. And that's the whole process! Cross out the prepositional phrases and you'll be able to pick the subject from the nouns that are left. It's usually the remaining noun closest to the verb.

If you're ever unsure of whether a verb such as *show* is singular or plural, test it by putting *he* and *they* in front and then asking yourself which sounds more correct: *He show...* OR *They show...*

Hopefully, *They show...* sounds more correct to you, which means *show* is the plural form (since *they* is obviously plural).

Let's try some more difficult ones. Note that in the following example, we can cross out both a prepositional phrase and a comma phrase.

Example 3	
Question:	Films by Miyazaki and Itami, including Miyazaki's <i>Spirited Away</i> , (<i>excites/excite</i>) the imagination.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: Films , , (<i>excites/excite</i>) the imagination.
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>Films</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>Films</i> singular or plural? Plural.
Answer:	Films by Miyazaki and Itami, including Miyazaki's <i>Spirited Away</i> , excite the imagination.
Example 4	
Question:	Her jewelry, in addition to her pokemon cards, (<i>was/were</i>) stolen by the robber.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: Her jewelry, , (<i>was/were</i>) stolen .
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>Her jewelry</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>Her jewelry</i> singular or plural? Singular.
Answer:	Her jewelry, in addition to her pokemon cards, was stolen by the robber.

You might think that the verb should be plural because the sentence mentions both jewelry and cards, but because of the comma phrase, the subject is just the jewelry.

Example 5	
Question:	Beside the bins, where one could smell the stench of rotten eggs, (<i>was/were</i>) a pack of philosophy majors gathering cans for recycling.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: , , (<i>was/were</i>) a pack
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>a pack</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>a pack</i> singular or plural? Singular.
Answer:	Beside the bins, where one could smell the stench of rotten eggs, was a pack of philosophy majors gathering cans for recycling.

Again, make sure you can identify that *was* is singular whereas *were* is plural. Everyone uses the correct form in simple conversation, but some students have trouble identifying the correct form in a grammar test setting.

Example 6	
Question:	Inside heaven's kingdom (<i>rests/rest</i>) Charlie and his angels.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: (<i>rests/rest</i>) Charlie and his angels.
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>Charlie and his angels</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>Charlie and his angels</i> singular or plural? Plural.
Answer:	Inside heaven's kingdom rest Charlie and his angels.
Example 7	
Question:	There (<i>is/are</i>) many other examples to support my point.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: There aren't any to cross out. Note that <i>to support</i> is not a prepositional phrase because it doesn't end in a noun. It's an infinitive.
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>many other examples</i>

Step 3:	Is <i>many other examples</i> singular or plural? Plural.
Answer:	There are many other examples to support my point.

These last three examples show that the subject can appear after the verb, something the SAT loves to do to trip students up.

Another question variation you'll come across deals with helping verbs, which are necessary to form certain tenses. Examples of helping verbs are bolded below:

has seen
was forgotten
is watching
have been

When you see these verb forms, it is the helping verb that must agree with the subject.

Example 8	
Question:	The few ideas that I've come up with last night (<i>has/have</i>) given my team enough to work with.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: The few ideas (<i>has/have</i>) given my team enough to work with.
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>The few ideas</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>The few ideas</i> singular or plural? Plural.
Correct:	The few ideas that I've come up with last night have given my team enough to work with.
Example 9	
Question:	The forks and knives are in the kitchen, and the jar with the thai peanut sauce (<i>has/have</i>) been sitting in the refrigerator.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: The forks and knives are in the kitchen, and the jar (<i>has/have</i>) been sitting in the refrigerator.
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>the jar</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>the jar</i> singular or plural? Singular.

Answer:	The forks and knives are in the kitchen, and the jar with the thai peanut sauce has been sitting in the refrigerator.
Example 10	
Question:	The players on our all-star tennis team (<i>is/are</i>) taken on luxury cruises every year.
Step 1:	Cross out the prepositional phrases/comma phrases/relative clauses: The players (<i>is/are</i>) taken on luxury cruises every year.
Step 2:	What is the subject? <i>The players</i>
Step 3:	Is <i>The players</i> singular or plural? Plural.
Answer:	The players on our all-star tennis team are taken on luxury cruises every year.

Another question variation you might see is one in which the verb is in a phrase or clause you would normally cross out. For example,

I visited my aunt, who (*is/are*) a panda caretaker, earlier today.

Note that the underlined portion is a comma phrase. To find the subject if the verb is located in a phrase or clause like the one above, just ask yourself what it's describing. In this case, the phrase is obviously describing *my aunt*, which is singular. Therefore, we need the singular verb *is*.

I visited my **aunt**, who **is** a panda caretaker, earlier today.

Example 11	
Question:	Where are the cookies that (<i>was/were</i>) in the cookie jar?
Answer:	Where are the cookies that were in the cookie jar?

In Example 11, we have a relative clause that describes *cookies*, which is plural.

Example 12	
Question:	I have no interest in luxury products, which (<i>caters/cater</i>) only to the wealthy.
Answer:	I have no interest in luxury products, which cater only to the wealthy.

Now let's walk through a really tricky example that combines everything we've learned so far in this chapter:

Mastery of magic tricks that truly (*surprises/surprise*) the audience (*requires/require*) lots of time.

Here, we have to figure out the subjects for two verbs. Cross out the prepositional phrases and relative clause:

Mastery (*requires/require*) lots .

Now it's easy to see that *mastery* is the main subject of the sentence. *Mastery* is singular so we need the singular verb *requires*. After all, it's the *mastery* that *requires* a lot of time. But let's get back to the first verb, which is crossed out within the relative clause, and ask ourselves what that relative clause is describing. What is truly surprising the audience? Magic tricks! *Magic tricks* is plural so we need the plural verb *surprise*.

Mastery of magic tricks that truly **surprise** the audience **requires** lots of time.

Now, a few more rules you should know:

Example 13	
Question:	<i>The Simpsons (is/are)</i> the longest running American sitcom.
Answer:	<i>The Simpsons</i> is the longest running American sitcom.
Rule:	Names of books, TV shows, bands, and movies are all singular.
Example 14	
Question:	Charles and Kate (<i>was/were</i>) at the ball last night.
Answer:	Charles and Kate were at the ball last night.
Rule:	Subjects joined by <i>and</i> are always plural.
Example 15	
Question:	Everybody (<i>loves/love</i>) Raymond.
Answer:	Everybody loves Raymond.
Rule:	<i>Everybody, everything, every, anybody, anyone, no one</i> are all singular subjects.
Example 16	
Questions:	Each of the candidates (<i>has/have</i>) two minutes to respond. Neither of the candidates (<i>wants/want</i>) to respond.

Answers:	Each of the candidates has two minutes to respond. Neither of the candidates wants to respond.
Rule:	<i>Each, neither, and either</i> are all singular subjects.

Before we go to the exercises, you probably have quite a few grammar rules swirling around in your head. Let's go over a few common errors that students make when they start thinking about subjects and verbs. Take a look at the following sentence:

He likes to sway to R&B music instead of rocking to AC/DC.

On the SAT, you must be able to identify which words are verbs before you can check for their subjects. Some students mistakenly think that *to sway* and *rocking* are verbs in that sentence. However, *to sway* is called an **infinitive** (*to be, to hate, to run,...*) and *rocking* is called a **gerund** (*running, cooking, exploding,...*). You've probably heard of infinitives in French or Spanish class, where it's the root form of a verb before you conjugate it. It's the same in English. Infinitives and gerunds are **not verbs so there's no need to check for subject-verb agreement**. The only actual verb in this example is *likes*. Again, gerunds and infinitives are **never verbs**. Don't waste time checking for their subjects.

Lastly, the SAT loves to throw in more than one verb in the same sentence. That way, one of the verbs can be buried deeper into the sentence to fool your ear. In these questions, split the sentence into two and make sure both verbs agree.

Example 17	
Wrong:	John and Harry studied computer science and was recruited by Google to develop new services.
Sentence 1:	John and Harry studied computer science. <i>Correct.</i>
Sentence 2:	John and Harry was recruited by Google to develop new services. <i>Wrong.</i>
Correct:	John and Harry studied computer science and were recruited by Google to develop new services.
Example 18	
Wrong:	Poisonous traps that attracts and then kills off rats are spread throughout this office.
Sentence 1:	Poisonous traps that attracts rats are spread throughout this office. <i>Wrong.</i>
Sentence 2:	Poisonous traps that then kills off rats are spread throughout this office. <i>Wrong.</i>

Correct:	Poisonous traps that attract and then kill off rats are spread throughout this office.
Example 19	
Wrong:	I was walking down the street and were chatting with my friend about his day.
Sentence 1:	I was walking down the street. <i>Correct.</i>
Sentence 2:	I were chatting with my friend about his day. <i>Wrong.</i>
Correct:	I was walking down the street and (was) chatting with my friend about his day.

In Example 19, the second *was* is unnecessary because the first *was* serves as a helping verb for both *walking* and *chatting*. If we stripped out all the details of the sentence, it would read, *I was walking and chatting...*, which is a grammatically fine sentence.

Practice

1) After driving through five states in a span of 14 hours, Carmen, whose two best friends accompanied her on this journey up the East Coast — which was completed in a rundown sedan overpowered by the smell of two lemon air fresheners — were exhausted — physically and mentally drained.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. were exhausted to the point of being physically and mentally drained.
- C. was exhausted — physically and mentally drained.
- D. were physically and mentally exhausted.

2) Perhaps, the professor told his wide-eyed students on the first day of class, the best way to learn these complex math equations was not by mindless memorization, but by consistent practice until it was engrained into their brains. “Learning,” he loved to tell them, “is a time-consuming endeavor.”

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. until they were engrained into their brains.
- C. until their brains were sufficiently engrained by the equations.
- D. until it was, finally and wholly, engrained into their brains.

3) New York, a city with a rich sports history, house two baseball teams, two football teams (if, of course, you count the Giants, who play their home games in East Rutherford, New Jersey), two hockey teams, one basketball team, and now two soccer teams — New York City F.C. recently arrived to the city’s sports scene.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. house two baseball teams;
- C. house two teams that play baseball, including the Yankees and the Mets,
- D. houses two baseball teams,

4) Each of the company’s 1,500 employees — a pool of workers that include the CEO, COO, and CFO — were qualified to earn a raise after a booming quarter of sales.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. that includes; was qualified to earn
- C. NO CHANGE; was qualified to earn
- D. that includes; NO CHANGE

5) When the coach asked her to select her favorite sport, she had trouble deciding. “Basketball and soccer have long been my primary interests,” she explained in a written note, “but recently cross country has jumped up the list.”

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. has long been my primary interest
- C. has long been my primary interests
- D. has interested me the most throughout my athletic career

Practice

1. Everyone in the class (was, were) to give a report.
2. Either Felicia or Ellen (is, are) planning a hobo party.
3. (Does, Do) either of them know how to swim?
4. (Does, Do) Allen or the girls in the class know why radium glows in the dark?
5. The length of these boats (are, is) twenty feet.
6. The number of immigrants in the United States (is, are) astounding.
7. Inside the door (stands, stand) severely undernourished kittens.
8. In the last few months, everyone in the courses (has, have) had to fill out an additional form.
9. One of the players (is, are) hurt.
10. Around the corner (sits, sit) among a group of strangers three frightened children.
11. The students in the algebra class (have, has) finished taking the exam.
12. (Do, Does) either of the girls own a bicycle?
13. Each of those jackets (costs, cost) too much.
14. Every one of these planes (carries, carry) fifty passengers.
15. Judy, along with the rest of the girls, (has, have) already gone to the banquet.
16. Each of the organizations (has, have) a faculty sponsor.
17. The infantry, which fights with portable weapons, (constitutes, constitute) the largest division.
18. Either Jerry or his brothers (ask, asks) more questions than is necessary.
19. Either the orchestra or the choir (gives, give) two free concerts a year.
20. If you sit quietly, there (is, are) a greater possibility of seeing the rare bird.
21. My neighbor and closest friend (is, are) Susan Willis.
22. Kim, Chris, and my brother Ed (think, thinks) that the Steelers will win.
23. Nobody in our class (wants, want) to be the moderator of the meeting.
24. Every one of my friends (has, have) read this fascinating book about planets.
25. Along the road (sits, sit) hidden among the bushes two newborn puppies.
26. Under the old boards (was, were) a frightened mouse.

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|---------|----------|-----------------|-----------|---------|
| 1. was | 7. stand | 13. costs | 19. gives | 25. sit |
| 2. is | 8. has | 14. carries | 20. is | 26. was |
| 3. does | 9. is | 15. has | 21. is | |
| 4. does | 10. sit | 16. has | 22. think | |
| 5. is | 11. have | 17. constitutes | 23. wants | |
| 6. is | 12. does | 18. ask | 24. has | |