

Subject-Verb Agreement

The basic principle behind subject-verb agreement is that a singular subject needs a singular verb and a plural subject needs a plural verb. So, the **subject** of your sentence (usually the **noun** found before the verb) must **agree** with the **verb** itself – they must agree in terms of **number**.

Remember:

- **Subject:** The main topic of the sentence.
- **Noun:** A 'naming' word that names a person, a place, a thing or an idea.
- **Verb:** A 'doing' word that expresses an action or otherwise helps to make a statement.

This means that a singular noun (e.g. 'the cat') takes a singular verb (e.g. 'sleeps'); and a plural noun (e.g. 'the cats') takes a plural verb (e.g. 'sleep').

This can, in many cases, be seen as a rule of having only one 's':

'The cat sleeps' vs. 'The cats sleep'

That is, if the subject noun is plural (ends in 's'), then the verb is plural (does not take 's').

However, while this is a useful rule-of-thumb, it doesn't work with irregular verbs or nouns.

- Irregular verbs have different forms which must be learned.
- For example: Subject-verb agreement with the verb 'to be' (present tense):
 - 'I am'
 - 'You are'
 - 'He/she/it is'
 - 'We are'
 - 'You (plural) are'
 - 'They are'

Some other subject-verb agreement rules:

- A phrase between subject and verb does not affect the agreement.
'**The cat** with nine kittens **eats** fish' – singular noun, singular verb
- Compound subjects joined by 'and' are plural and therefore take a plural verb.
'**The cat and the dog** are sleeping.'
- Compound adjectives joined by 'or' are singular and take a singular verb.
'Either **Sarah or James** is working.'
- Indefinite pronouns (someone, somebody, each, either, everyone, anyone) are treated as singular.
'**Everyone** is happy.'

Reference: UCT Upper Campus Writing Centre, 2015