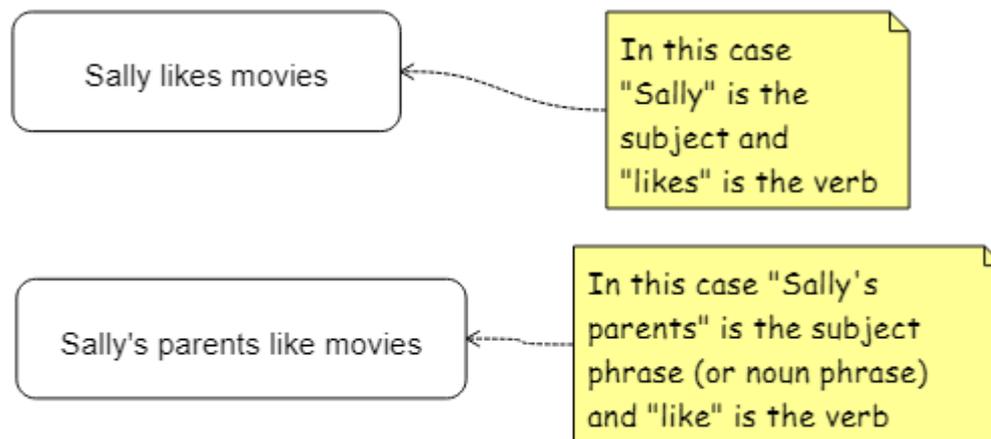


# Subject-Verb Agreement

“Agreement” here does not refer to having similar views about a topic. It refers to a concept in grammar. There are two types of “agreement” to know about: **subject-verb agreement** and **pronoun-noun agreement**. It is important to know how agreement works so that you are not making simple grammatical mistakes. In this helpsheet we discuss subject-verb agreement (see also the helpsheet **pronoun-noun agreement**).

## Subject-verb agreement

A “subject” is the **noun** or **noun phrase** used in a sentence. This must “agree” with the verb (or “doing/action” word) in a sentence. In essence, *if the subject is singular the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural the verb must be plural*. For example:



Note the differences in the relationship between the subject and verb. When the subject is singular (“Sally”) there is an “s” added to the verb—which makes it singular; when the subject is plural (“Sally’s parents”), the “s” is omitted from the verb—making it plural. This applies in all cases including academic writing:

- Jones (2013) *argues* that phenomenology is critical to the discussion.
- Jaspers and Henderson (2012) *argue* that phenomenology is critical to the discussion.

**Notice that nouns and verbs form plurals in opposite ways: when making a noun plural, one adds an “s” or “ies” (movie/movies); when making a verb plural one removes the “s”.**

Notice that this also applies when adding “en” to make a noun plural:

- The child likes ice-cream
- Children like ice-cream.

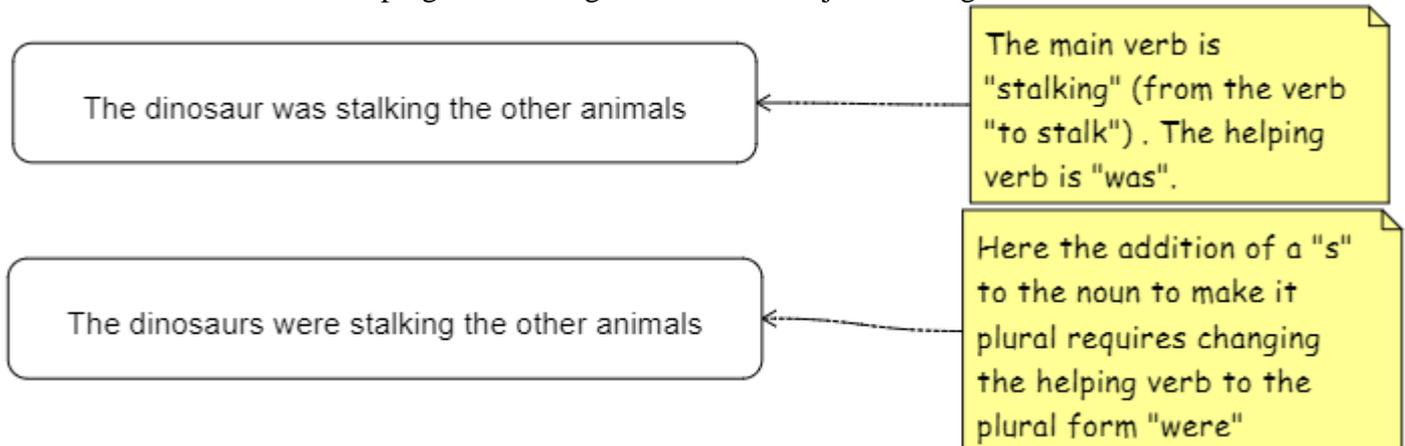
## Helping verbs

This simple rule of agreement works when using **helping verbs** too. A helping verb (or “auxiliary” verb) is a word or group of words added to a main verb to extend its meaning. The following are the main kinds of helping verbs which sometimes need to change depending on the meaning intended:

- *be* (including *am, is, are, was, were, being, been*), *have, has had, do, does, did, can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must, ought to*.

*I must go to the party* is different from *I ought to go to the party*. (Both are modifying and extending the verb “to go”, but they do so in different ways).

Note that the **verb form** of helping verbs changes in cases of subject-verb agreement.



So:

- The man *has* helped others.
- The men *have* helped others.
- The girl *has* been worried about the exam.
- The girls *have* been worried about the exam.
- The problem *is* a source of danger in the company.
- The problems *were* a source of danger in the company.

The rule applies to all **personal pronouns** (*he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, us, and them*), **but not I and you**:

- He claims/We claim (singular pronoun = singular verb with an “s”; plural pronoun = no “s”)
- She argues/They argue (singular pronoun = singular verb with an “s”; plural pronoun = no “s”)
- *Compare*: “I argue/You argue” (no change)

The only time this **singular-singular/plural-plural** rule does not work is under two circumstances:

**Simple past construction** (here there is a past tense form of the verb, and it does not need to change)

- The researchered argued that ...
- Researchers argued that ...

**Second helping verb using has/have** (here there are two helping verbs “could have” which remain the same despite the noun changing):

- The policeman *could have* shown some mercy.
- The policemen *could have* shown some mercy.