

# Subject-Verb Agreement

“Agreement” here does not refer to having similar views with someone else about a topic. It refers to a concept in English grammar.

**Subjects** are the nouns, noun phrases, or naming words (for things or objects) used in a sentence.  
**Verbs** are “doing” or “action” words in a sentence.

## Agreement

Like the pronoun-noun agreement rule (refer to the helpsheet, *Pronoun-Noun Agreement*), the subject-verb agreement rule is that the subject used in a sentence must agree with the verb.

In essence, if the subject is singular, then the verb must also be singular. If the subject is plural, then the verb must also be plural.

### Example: Subject-Verb Agreement

Sally likes movies.

In this case, “Sally” is the subject and “likes” is the verb.

Sally’s parents like movies.

In this case, “Sally’s parents” is the subject phrase (or noun phrase) and “like” is the verb.

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. And 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.

Example: Changing the Verb Form of Helping Verbs	
The dinosaur was stalking the other animals.	The main verb is “stalking” (from the verb “to stalk”). The helping verb is “was”. Both are singular.
The dinosaurs were stalking the other animals.	Here, the addition of “s” to the noun to make it plural requires us to change the helping verb to the plural form “were”. Both are plural.

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**, which are *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 verbs** using **has/have** (also referred to as model verbs) remain the same despite the noun changing. 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.

## Other helpsheets available

- Pronoun-Noun Agreement
- Prepositions
- Writing in an Academic Style