

Every sentence has a subject and a verb. They must agree.

A singular subject requires a singular verb form, while a plural subject requires a plural verb form. Subject-Verb agreement is simple, in principle, but it is not always easy to carry out in speaking and writing. Three verbs, in particular, often confuse students: to be, to have, and to do.

Number, Person, and Tense

Number: English is simple, in a sense. When we refer to “number” in English, we mean only one of two things: singular (only one) or plural (more than one). That’s it. There are only two “numbers” in English: “one” and “more than one.”

Person: We have three “persons” (not people): First person (1st person) refers to the person or group speaking (“I” or “we”). Second person refers to the person (or people) being spoken to (you). Second person is always “you.” Third person is a bit more interesting. It can be “he,” “she,” “it,” or “they.” But it can also be “Mr. Jones” or “Annabelle.” It can be “Mohammad” or “Karina.” It can be “The Coca-Cola Company” or “The players.” Third person refers to the people or thing that is being written about (when it is not “I” or “me”).

Tense: There are many tenses in English, but we will examine two basic tenses: present (the current moment) and past (before the current moment).

The Verb “To Be” (was, were)

The different forms of the verb “to be” are listed below.

	Singular	Plural
1 st Person		
Present Tense	I am	We are
Past Tense	I was	We were
2 nd Person		
Present Tense	You are	You are
Past Tense	You were	You were
3 rd Person		
Present Tense	He, She, It is	They are
Past Tense	He, She, It was	They were

Error: Mrs. Adams and Margaret was standing next to the train station when the sheriff drove up.

“Mrs. Adams and Margaret” is the subject of the verb “to be.” The subject is more than one (plural), so the correct form should be “Mrs. Adams and Margaret **were** standing next to the train station when the sheriff drove up.”

Error: Because eleven students is always late for class, the principal decided to eliminate spirit week.

“Eleven students” is the subject of the verb “to be.” The subject is more than one (plural) so the correct form should be “Because eleven students are always late for class, the principal decided to eliminate spirit week.”

As A Helping Verb: The rules of subject-verb agreement also apply when the verb “to be” is used as a helping verb, as in “were running” or “was baking.”

The Verb “To Have” (has, have)

The different forms of the verb “to have” are listed below.

	Singular	Plural
1 st Person		
Present Tense	I have	We have
Past Tense	I had	We had
2 nd Person		
Present Tense	You have	You have
Past Tense	You had	You had
3 rd Person		
Present Tense	He, She, It has	They have
Past Tense	He, She, It had	They had

Error: The Robertson Company have a legitimate complaint about the zoning regulations that were just passed.

“The Robertson Company” is the subject of the verb “to have”; it is singular and 3rd person. Therefore, the correct form should be “The Robertson Company **has** a legitimate complaint about the zoning regulations that were just passed.”

Error: When Karina and Marie has the time, they would like to travel to Greece.

“Karina and Marie” is the subject of the verb “to have”; it is plural and in the 3rd person. Therefore, the correct form should be “When Karina and Marie **have** the time, they would like to travel to Greece.”

The Verb “To Do” (do, does)

The different forms of the verb “to do” are listed below.

	Singular	Plural
1 st Person		
Present Tense	I do	We do
Past Tense	I did	We did
2 nd Person		
Present Tense	You do	You do
Past Tense	You did	You did
3 rd Person		
Present Tense	He, She, It does	They do
Past Tense	He, She, It did	They did

Notice: The only tricky form is 3rd person singular, “does.” Every other form is “do” or “did.”

Error: Yesenia and Jorge does the catering for the Elk’s lodge in Peoria.

“Yesenia and Jorge” is the subject of the verb “to do”; it is 3rd person and plural. Therefore, the correct form should be “Yesenia and Jorge do the catering for the Elk’s lodge in Peoria.”