Subject-verb agreement

A verb must agree in number with its SUBJECT: a singular subject takes a singular...

Lesson `rw.conventions.W3`

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The idea

A verb must agree in number with its SUBJECT: a singular subject takes a singular verb, a plural subject a plural verb. The subject is not always the noun nearest the verb; intervening phrases (especially 'of ...' and other prepositional phrases) do not change the subject, so look past them to the head noun.

What is the true subject? Is it separated from the verb by a phrase, an indefinite word, a compound, an inversion, or a collective noun?

Strip away intervening phrases to find the head noun. Treat each/every/neither as singular. 'And' is plural; 'or/nor' agrees with the nearer subject. For inversions, find the subject after the verb.

Watch every step

On the high shelf ___ several old books.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A. are

B. is ✗ *inverted/collective error*

C. was ✗ *inverted/collective error*

D. has been ✗ *inverted/collective error*

Why **A** — "are." Match the verb's number to that subject.

Now a harder one

The committee, along with its advisors, ___ scheduled to meet weekly.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- **A.** is
- **B.** are ✗ *agreement with nearest noun*
- **C.** were ✗ *agreement with nearest noun*
- **D.** have been ✗ *inverted/collective error*

Why A — "is." Match the verb's number to that subject.

The method, in one line

Subject-verb agreement

Strip away intervening phrases to find the head noun. Treat each/every/neither as singular. 'And' is plural; 'or/nor' agrees with the nearer subject. For inversions, find the subject after the verb.

Did I agree with the SUBJECT, not the nearest noun? Did I handle indefinite words, compounds, inversions, and collectives correctly?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

⚠ agreement with nearest noun

Makes the verb agree with a noun in an intervening phrase (often a prepositional 'of ...' phrase) rather than the true subject.

⚠ indefinite-singular error

Treats a singular indefinite subject (each, every, everyone, neither, either) as plural, or vice versa.

Name the trap before you pick — most wrong answers are one of these two.

Try it, then watch the walk-through

Explore this live

Watch the walk-through