

## AGREEMENT: SUBJECT AND VERB

In spoken English, we handle some of the relationships in a sentence informally. In written English, we work them out more exactly. For instance, we make sure the verb *agrees* with its subject. If both subject and verb have different forms for singular and plural, they change from one to the other together.

Candy is sweet.

Their ally was defeated.

This dog hates people.

Candies are sweet.

Their allies were defeated.

These dogs hate people.

Often there is a **compound subject**, that is, more than one subject for each clause. *And* adds one possible subject to another. The verb then appears in the plural form even if each of the subjects is singular when taken by itself. *Or* merely gives the reader a choice between two possible subjects. Each of them may be a single item.

**Plural:** Both his father *and* his mother *are* to blame.

**Singular:** Either his father *or* his mother *is* to blame.

1. Don't let material that *comes between* the subject and the verb mislead you. Don't lose track of agreement when for some reason the verb *comes before* the subject.

**Right:** *The arrogance* of his noisy supporters *was* unbelievable. (*It* was unbelievable, not they.)

**Right:** *The four-letter words* that a teacher hears daily no longer *shock* me. (*They* no longer shock.)

**Right:** In this ancient burial ground *rest* the *bones* of people long forgotten. (The bones rest.)

2. Use *each*, *either*, *neither*, and *every* as singular—as if you were looking at one person or or thing at a time. After *everybody* (*everyone*), *somebody* (*someone*), *anybody* (*anyone*), and *nobody* (*no one*), make the verb singular. Also make singular any pronoun that points back to one of these **indefinite pronouns**. Do the same when using *one* or *a person*.

**Right:** *Each* of the sisters *is* equally successful in *her* profession.

**Right:** Someone has left the motor running in *his or her* car.

**Right:** *Everybody* was telling *herself* to be calm.

The singular *he* or *his* used to refer to a typical person is now widely considered sexist. When the use of *he* or *she*, or *himself* or *herself* becomes awkward, try changing the whole sentence to the plural:

**Singular:** *A person* rarely takes an objective look at *himself* or *herself*.

**Plural:** *People* rarely take an objective look at *themselves*.

3. In sentences starting with *there*, look for the subject *after* the verb and make the verb agree with it. Use a plural form of the verb if several singular subjects are joined by *and*.

**Right:** There *are* several *sandwiches* left.

**Right:** There *have been* few radial *incidents* at the school.

**Right:** In the drawer, there *were* a handwritten *will* and a *picture* of his wife.

4. Used as relative pronouns, *who*, *which*, and *that* may point back to either a singular or a plural.

**Singular:** She talked to the *student* who *is* renting the house.

**Plural:** She talked to the *students* who *are* renting the house.

5. When the meaning requires it, carry agreement through not only from the subject to the verb but also to other parts of the sentence.

**Illogical:** My *friends* all *come* from a tightly knit *family*.    *Many people* lost *their job*.

**Logical:** My *friends* all *come* from tightly knit *families*.    *Many people* lost *their jobs*.

In the following sentences, circle the choices appropriate to written English.

1. The political attitudes of the typical student *ranges / range* from apathy to enthusiasm.
2. Before an election, each of the candidates *makes / make* wild predictions of victory.
3. The qualifications of the average candidate for local office *is / are* asking for equal time for *his or her / their* cause.
4. Television could be devoted exclusively to every candidate who *is / are* asking for equal time for *his or her / their* cause.
5. Sometimes someone behind in the polls *loses / lose his or her / their* temper and *calls / call* the press a bunch of liars.
6. One of the basic requirements for victory in a political campaign *is / are* money.
7. A good-looking candidate without ample funds *has / have* little chance to be seen on the television screen.
8. A reporter who covers campaigns *expects / expect* to be flown from one place to the other.
9. Charisma is one of those things that *is / are* hard to duplicate in the laboratory.
10. The twists and turns of the typical presidential campaign *is / are* difficult to chart in advance.
11. The early front-runner in several recent campaigns *has / have* finished last.
12. There *is / are* always people willing to give up a good job and run for office.
13. There *is / are* often many days of hard work between the first baby kissed by the candidate and the final returns.
14. The lesson in store for the many unsuccessful candidates *is / are* grim.
15. Few people love a loser or *volunteers / volunteer his / their* money to help pay off debts.