

## **Subject-Verb Agreement**

SUU Writing Center

(last updated 8/18/2004)

Many writers struggle with subject-verb agreement errors because they misidentify the subject of a sentence. This mistake leads to yet another one--choosing a plural verb based on an incorrectly chosen plural subject. The real subject is “hidden” somewhere in the sentence; it is actually singular. While most writers understand that a singular subject must have a singular verb and that a plural subject must have a plural verb, most do not understand the critical importance of locating the correct subject. Therefore, before concerning yourself with deciding if the verb should be plural or singular, decide if you have located the real subject of the sentence. To locate the subject more easily, try asking yourself the following question: ***Who or what is performing the action of the verb?*** Also keep in mind that nouns found in prepositional phrases are never subjects of the whole sentence.

<b>Sentence</b>	<b>Who or what is performing the action?</b>
I type my papers in the Writing Center.	<i>I</i> , since it is <i>I</i> who type.
Each of the papers is excellent.	<b><i>Each</i></b> , a singular word, is the subject of the verb <i>is</i> . The words papers can't be the subject because it is enclosed in the prepositional phrase <b><i>of the papers</i></b> .

Another problem can arise when the “real subject” is at the end of the sentence. Refer to the example and explanation shown below.

<b>Example:</b>	<b>Explanation:</b>
In his dresser drawer was/were heaps of laundry.	The sentence contains inverted sentence structure; the sentence means: <i>Heaps of laundry were in his dresser drawer</i> . When answering the question “Who or what is performing the action?” the answer is <i>heaps</i> , a plural word. Therefore, the correct verb choice is <i>were</i> , a plural verb.

Another potential problem arising from asking this question concerns **pronouns**. A definition of a pronoun may prove helpful: a pronoun takes the place of a noun and acts *exactly as a noun does*. In other words, the same rules that accompany a noun as a subject also accompany a pronoun as a subject. But this rule can get a bit messy; some pronouns are **always singular**; some are **always plural**; some may be either depending on the sentence and require additional evaluation. Refer to the chart below for assistance.

<b>Pronoun Type:</b>	<b>Pronoun Group:</b>	<b>Examples:</b>	<b>Explanation:</b>
Always singular:	<i>Each, either, neither one, everyone, everybody, no one, nobody, anyone anybody, someone, somebody</i>	Each has his or her own responsibilities.  No one sleeps!  Someone is here!	Notice all the verbs in these sentences are singular because these pronouns are singular.

Always plural:	<i>both, any, some, all, most</i>	All of the students ate their lunch after PE.  Most of the buildings were built in the sixteenth century.	<b>All</b> of these subject pronouns <b>refer</b> to a plural word, so they must have a plural verb.
May be singular or plural: <sup>1</sup>	<i>some, any, none, all, most</i>	Some of your work was impressive.  Some of your jeans are still dirty.	<i>Some</i> in the 1st sentence refers to <i>homework</i> , a singular noun, but <i>Some</i> in the 2nd sentence refers to <i>jeans</i> , a plural word.

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<sup>1</sup> Remember, nouns found in prepositional phrases are never subjects of the whole sentence they are in; the phrase itself may stand as the subject (“In my purse” was what she said. *In my purse* acts as the subject but *purse* itself is not the subject of the whole sentence).