Subject-Verb Agreement

Sample Errors

SAMPLE 1: X Matt’s beach house, one of the cottages on Ocean Street near the boardwalk, were not damaged by the hurricane.

SAMPLE 2: X The advantages of this entertainment system is that it is compact and that it is less expensive than what you would pay if you bought the cassette recorder, CD player, and radio separately.

What’s the Problem?

The problem in a lost subject error is that the verb agrees with a word that is not the actual subject-usually with a noun that is closer to the verb than the actual subject is. In Sample 1, were is plural to agree with cottages, but the real subject is house, which is singular and should have a singular verb. Sample 2 has the opposite error. The singular verb is agrees with system but should be plural to agree with advantages.

What Causes the Problem?

When the subject phrase is long or complicated, writers tend to lose track of the actual subject. Instead, they make the verb agree with the noun or pronoun nearest to it rather than with the actual subject back at the beginning of the sentence.

Diagnostic Exercise

Correct all errors involving lost-subject agreement using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

The beginning of the first public schools in the United States date from the early 1800’s. The pressure to create public schools open to children of working-class parents were a direct result of the union movements in large cities. In response, state legislatures gave communities the legal right to levy local property taxes to pay for free schools open to the public. By the middle of the nineteenth century, control of school policies and curriculum were in the hands of the state government. As school populations outgrew one-room schoolhouses, the design of school buildings on the East Coast were completely changed to accommodate separate rooms for children of different ages. Before this time, all children in a schoolhouse, regardless of age, was taught together in the same room by the same teacher. (4)
Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

In English, the subject of a sentence is usually the first noun or pronoun in the U sentence (excluding introductory elements). The following tip will help you ESL find the subject.

**FIRST-WORD TIP:** When you check verbs for subject-verb agreement, jump back to the beginning of the sentence and find the first word that makes sense as the subject. In nearly all cases, that first word will be the subject.

Here is how jumping to the beginning of the sentence and taking the first word that makes sense would have correctly identified the subject in the first sample sentence:

**SAMPLE 1:** X Matt's beach house, one of the cottages on Ocean Street near the boardwalk, were not damaged by the hurricane.

**TIP APPLIED:** Matt's beach house, one of the cottages ...

**CORRECTION:** Matt's beach house, one of the cottages on Ocean Street near the boardwalk, were not damaged by the hurricane.

The first possible word that makes sense as the subject of the sentence is house (not cottages). The subject is singular, so the verb should also be singular.

**SAMPLE 2:** X The advantages of this entertainment system is that it is compact and that it is less expensive than what you would pay if you bought the cassette recorder, CD player, and radio separately.

**TIP APPLIED:** The advantages of this entertainment system…

**CORRECTION:** The advantages of this entertainment system are that it is compact and that it is less expensive than what you would pay if you bought the cassette recorder, CD player, and radio separately.

The first word that makes sense as the subject of the sentence is advantages (not system). The subject is plural, so the verb should also be plural.

Sentence Practice 1

In the following sentences, the dictionary form of the verb is in **boldface** type. Jump to the beginning of the sentence and find the first word that makes sense as the subject. Underline this subject and then make the verb agree with it.

**EXAMPLE:** The identity of the suspects in the recent robberies has not been released to the press.
1. In our recent games, the margin of our losses have been agonizingly small.

2. Our response to the accusations made by our opponents clearly show that they have misunderstood the facts of the case.

3. In the opinion of the committee, the type of programs shown during the hours that children usually watch television be clearly inappropriate.

4. The reasons for the collapse of the settlement agreement between the union and company management remain unclear to outside observers.

5. The time for cooking roasts in ovens depend on the type of meat.

**Sentence Practice 2**

In the following sentences, the dictionary form of the verb is in **boldface** type. Jump to the beginning of the sentence and find the first word that makes sense as the subject. Underline this subject and then make the verb agree with it. If the form of the verb is correct, write **OK** above it.

**EXAMPLE:** We bought the children some games on our last trip that be made by hand from the most beautiful hardwood.

1. Disagreements about the interpretation of the agreement have led to considerable unpleasantness among the parties involved.

2. The social aspects of developing the country's resources be often overlooked.

3. It always seems to be the case that the simplest solutions to a complex problem seem the most difficult to discover.

4. A group of incredibly noisy children playing outside my windows delight in keeping me from doing my homework.

5. Speculation about the nominees for the various Oscars dominate today's news.

**Sentence Practice 3**

Combine the following sentences by adding the information in the second sentence to the subject in the first sentence and choosing the correct verb form. In the new sentence, underline the subject once and the verb twice.

**EXAMPLE:** The diplomats (appear/appears) to be enjoying themselves. The diplomats are at Archduke Ferdinand's gala ball.
**ANSWER**: The diplomats at Archduke Ferdinand's gala ball appear to be enjoying themselves.

1. The lawyer (have/has) requested a postponement.  
The lawyer is representing the defendant in the case.

2. The reports (suggest/suggests) a problem.  
The reports were filed with the commission recently.

3. The family (deserve/deserves) compensation.  
The family was involved in the accident.

4. Programs (is/are) informative.  
The programs are on the Discovery Channel.

5. Students (return/returns) to school each September.  
The students are from around the country.

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**Editing Practice 1**

Correct all errors in the following paragraphs using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

**believe**  
The house cat is one of the oldest domesticated animals. Researchers who study the history of the cat believes that the ancestor of all of today's domestic cats were a species of small wildcats found in Africa and Europe. The first group of people to bring cats into human habitations were in Africa. (2)

However, the first actual domestication of cats as residents with humans was carried out by the Egyptians, who tamed cats to hunt rats and mice in grain storehouses. The pet cats of an important official or government officer was sacred. When one of these sacred cats were killed by a servant, even accidentally, the servant would be severely punished, possibly even put to death. (2)

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**Editing Practice 2**

Correct all errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

**is**  
One of the largest families of vertebrate animals are the family of reptiles. Reptiles include alligators,
crocodiles, lizards, snakes, and turtles. They share the feature of being cold-blooded. Reptiles are among the oldest families of animals on earth. Reptiles played a key role in bringing animal life out of the oceans and onto land through the evolution of eggs. Reptiles evolved from amphibians, the first creatures to come onto land. The great evolutionary advantage of reptiles were their eggs. Reptile eggs, with their leathery membrane or hard shell, has a great advantage: the embryo is encased in its own self-contained sack of fluid. The ability of reptiles to reproduce away from bodies of water give reptiles an enormous advantage over amphibians and explain why reptiles were able to expand into all the dry areas of the world. (4)

Editing Practice 3

Correct all errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

Many infants, despite going to sleep peacefully at the beginning of the night, wakes once or twice before morning. Parents often suspects hunger is the cause of the nighttime waking. This may be true for a younger baby. However, an infant who is over six months old and weighs at least fifteen pounds usually sleep from 8:00 P.m. until 5:00 or 6:00 A.M. without needing to eat. Some babies who are put into bed asleep at the beginning of the night has not learned to fall asleep on their own. These little ones call for a parent to come and soothe them back to sleep. Separation anxiety, especially in a nine- to twelve-month-old, cause other babies to need the comfort of a parent in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, parents of a night waker gets used to surviving on less sleep. (5)

Editing Practice

Identify Lost-Subject Errors in Your Writing

_____ Jump back to the beginning of each sentence and find the first word that makes sense as the subject.

_____ Cross out all words between the subject and the verb.

Correct Lost-Subject Errors in Your Writing
If the subject and verb do not agree in number, change the form of the verb to match the subject. Use a singular verb form for a singular subject. Use a plural verb form for a plural subject.

Subjects that are not next to their verb still determine whether the verb is singular or plural. Jump back to the beginning of the sentence to find the subject.