

# Agreement with Compound Subjects

## Sample Errors

SAMPLE 1: ~~X~~ The pencils and paper is on the desk.

SAMPLE 2: ~~X~~ Our genetic make-up and our personal experience makes us who we are.

## What's the Problem?

When two (or more) subjects are joined by *and*, they are called a **compound subject**. When using compound subjects, writers have a tendency to use a singular verb, even though compound subjects are normally plural. This is the problem in Samples 1 and 2.

## What Causes the Problem?

Compound subjects create a problem for some writers because writers may incorrectly think of them as a single collective unit. Although this argument has a certain logic to it, the usual grammatical convention is that compound subjects are plural and must have plural verbs.

Sometimes writers are aware that the verb must agree with the subject of the sentence, but they incorrectly consider only the noun closest to the verb and not the entire subject.

## Diagnostic Exercise

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.

I work in a busy law office. Even though we now have voice mail, answering the phone and writing down  
take  
messages takes up a lot of my time. I am also responsible for maintaining the law library, although most of the  
time I  
^  
do nothing more glamorous than shelving. The law books and reference material is always left scattered  
around the  
library, and some of the lawyers even leave their dirty coffee cups on the tables. I used to have a relatively  
comfortable working area, but the new computer terminal and modem has now taken up most of my personal  
space; that's progress, I guess. Despite all the stress, meeting the needs of clients and keeping track of all the  
information required in a modern law office makes it a fascinating job. (3)

## Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

Whenever your sentence contains *and*, check to see whether the *and* has joined two subjects together to create a compound subject. If so, then the subject is plural, and you must also use a plural verb.

Following is a tip to help you identify compound subjects.

**THEY TIP:** Whenever *and* is used in the subject part of a sentence, see whether you can replace the entire subject portion with the pronoun *they*. If you can, then the subject is a compound, and the verb must be made plural to agree with *they*.

This rule applies *only* to *and*. It does not apply when the subjects are joined by *or*. When subjects are joined by *or*, the rules are completely different: the verb agrees only with the *nearest* subject, which may be either singular or plural.

Here is how replacing the compound subject with *they* identifies the right form of the verb in the two sample sentences.

**SAMPLE 1:** ~~X~~ The pencils and some paper is on the desk.

They

**TIP APPLIED:** ~~X~~ The pencil and some paper is on the desk.

Since we know that the substitution of *they* for *the pencils and some paper* makes sense, we know that the sentence contains a compound subject. When *they* is the subject, it is easy to tell that the verb must be plural: *They are on the desk.* Thus, the sentence with the compound must also be plural:

are

**CORRECTION:** The pencils and some paper ~~is~~ on the desk.

**SAMPLE 2:** ~~X~~ Our genetic make-up and our personal experience makes us who we are.

They

**TIP APPLIED:** ~~Our genetic make up and our personal experience makes us who we are.~~

Since we know that the substitution of *they* for *our genetic make-up and our personal experience* makes sense, we know that the sentence contains a compound subject. When *they* is the subject, it is easy to tell that the verb must be plural: *They make us who we are.* Thus, the sentence with the compound must also be plural:

make

**CORRECTION:** Our genetic make-up and our personal experience ~~makes~~ us who we are.

A

### Sentence Practice 1

Underline the compound subjects in the following sentences. If there is an error in subject-verb agreement, make the necessary correction.

**EXAMPLE:** Green vegetables and fresh fruit ~~is~~ the basis of a good diet.

are

^

1. Two pairs of skis and a fleece vest was stolen from my car this weekend.
2. A lock and the key that goes with it is given to everyone who uses the lockers.
3. When there is a storm, the thunder and lightning scares my dog.

4. The debits and credits always adds up to zero.
5. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner is not included as part of the package.

### *Sentence Practice 2*

Underline the compound subjects in the following sentences. If there is an error in subject-verb agreement, make the necessary correction.

**EXAMPLE:** Linen and cotton <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ made from plants.

1. What we see and what we hear gives us our picture of the world.
2. My neighbor and his family sails to Nova Scotia each summer.
3. The sun and the nine planets composes our solar system.
4. His great natural dignity and his consideration for others was something that his friends and relatives would never forget.
5. The plants and the animals in this region is adapted to the extreme swings of temperature from hot days to freezing nights.

### *Sentence Practice 3*

Combine the following sentences by making a compound subject. Make the verb agree with the new subject. Underline the subject once and the verb twice in your new sentence.

**EXAMPLE:** Bread is a starch.  
Rice is a starch.

**ANSWER:** Bread and rice **are** starches.

1. Boardwalk is an expensive property in a Monopoly game.  
Park Place is an expensive property in a Monopoly game.
2. My neighbor Mariana works in the city.  
My brother Lucas works in the city.
3. The heat was driving us crazy.  
The humidity was driving us crazy.
4. Two apples were in the refrigerator.  
A can of soda was in the refrigerator.
5. A group of actors was discussing the film.  
The director was discussing the film.

## 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.

In Mozart's opera, *Don Giovanni*, comedy and melodrama <sup>are</sup> is mixed together in an unusual way. For example, the character and personality of Don Giovanni is surprisingly complex. His charm and bravery makes him almost a hero at times. Yet at other times, his aristocratic arrogance and deliberate cruelty to women makes him a complete villain. The seduction of a willing woman and a rape is the same to him. (4)

The role and character of his servant Leporello is also unusual. At first, his constant complaining and caustic asides to the audience makes Leporello seem to be just a conventional comic sidekick. Yet in some ways, his observations and reactions to his master's behavior becomes the center of attention. Leporello's admiration for the Don's charm and his repulsion at the Don's treatment of women reflects the audience's equally mixed feelings. (4)

## 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.

Barbara Kingsolver is the author of six books and a number of short stories. Her books and stories <sup>have</sup> ~~has~~ attracted a wide following. One of her most recent novels is *Animal Dreams*. Codi, her sister, and their father is the focus of our attention. The story deals with Codi's reluctant return home to a small town in Arizona to take care of her father, who is dying. The events that take place in the story are seen either from Codi's perspective or from her father's point of view. The past and the present constantly runs together in their minds. One of the main themes in the book is Codi's discovery of how deeply her present life and actions has been affected by dimly remembered events in her childhood. At first, it seems that Codi's father is totally out of touch with reality because he seems hopelessly stuck in the past.

However, as Codi begins to reconstruct a clearer picture of her own childhood, it is her father's vivid memories that actually provide the key to her adult understanding of her past. (3)

### 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.

The town and its inhabitants gradually <sup>take</sup> ~~takes~~ on greater and greater importance. Codi gradually begins to see how important the little town and its inhabitants is to her past and present life. The town, because of its unbroken connection from the past to the present, gradually becomes more and more important to Codi. In fact, the town and its people evolves to become one of the central characters in the book. Finally, it is the town and its living and dead, that brings Codi back to life as a complete person who can connect her past to her present. In addition to its serious themes, the book is very funny. Kingsolver's sharp eye and wit makes every scene and conversation vivid and convincing. (4)

### Editing Checklist

#### Identify Compound-Subject Errors in Your Writing

\_\_\_\_\_ When you see *and* in the subject part of your sentence, use the *They* Tip to see if you have a compound subject.

\_\_\_\_\_ If *they* makes sense when it replaces the subject, the subject is compound and requires a plural verb.

#### Correct Compound-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 the plural verb form for a compound subject.

**THE  
BOTTOM  
LINE**

A noun or pronouns and another noun or pronoun joined by *and* make a compound subject.

