

Lesson 1: Subject-Verb Disagreement

Finding Verbs

The verb is the most important part of a sentence, but verbs aren't always easy to spot. Consider the word *swim* in the sentences *The ducks swim in the pond* and *The ducks love to swim*. In the first sentence, *swim* is the verb. In the second sentence, *swim* is part of a noun phrase. (*To swim* is the *thing* that the ducks love.) So how do we spot verbs?

A verb is what conveys the essential meaning of a clause (a string of words that convey an idea). Every idea requires a verb. The sentence *The ducks swim in the pond* says that *Something swims somewhere*, so the verb is *swim*. The sentence *The ducks love to swim* says that *Something loves something*, so the verb is *love*. Every verb requires a subject, that is, what does the verb. In both sentences, the subject is *ducks*. A verb may also require an object, that is, what receives the verb. In *The ducks love to swim*, the object is *to swim*, because that is the thing that is loved.

Example:

When David approached third base, the coach waved him home.

This sentence contains two related ideas, so it contains two clauses, and therefore two verbs:

Clause 1: *When David **approached** third base*
Verb: *approached* Subject: *David*
Object: *third base*

Clause 2: *the coach **waved** him home*
Verb: *waved* Subject: *the coach*
Object: *him*

Subject-Verb Disagreement (SVD)

Every verb must agree in number (singular or plural) with its subject. Subject-verb disagreement is one of the most common errors tested for on the SAT. If you are a native speaker of English, the best way to check for subject-verb disagreement is to find the subject and verb (ignoring all the intervening words) and say *them together*.

Example:

The people, who are easily persuaded by corporate-sponsored media, spends very little time analyzing issues.

The subject of the verb *spends* is *people*. But *people spends* sounds wrong, because *spends* is the

“third person singular” form—as in *he spends*—but *people* is plural, so the phrase should be *people spend*.

Tricky Plurals and Singulars

These rules will help you to check whether a verb agrees in “number” with its subject:

Phrases like *Sam and Bob* are plural, but phrases like *Sam, in addition to Bob*, are singular. Phrases that start *as well as . . .*, *together with . . .*, *along with . . .*, or *in addition to . . .* are interrupters, which are not part of the main subject.

These words are singular: *each, anyone, anybody, anything, another, neither, either, every, everyone, someone, no one, somebody, everything, little, and much*. To check for SVD, you can replace any of them with *it*.

These words are plural: *phenomena* (singular: *phenomenon*), *media* (singular: *medium*), *data* (singular: *datum*), and *criteria* (singular: *criterion*). To check for SVD, you can replace any of them with *they*.

All of the following can be either singular or plural, according to the noun that follows the *of*: *none (of)*, *any (of)*, *some (of)*, *most (of)*, *more (of)*, and *all (of)*.

Verbs that follow subjects of the form *either A or B* and *neither A nor B* must agree with *B*, the noun closer to the verb.

Inverted Sentences

Usually the subject comes *before* the verb, but *inverted* clauses have the subject *after* the verb. For instance, sentences that start *There is . . .* or *There are . . .* are inverted. To check subject-verb agreement in these sentences, first “uninvert” them.

Example:

There are many flies in the barn. (inverted)
 V S

Many flies are in the barn. (uninverted)
 S V

Concept Review I: Subject-Verb Disagreement

Next to each noun or noun phrase, write “S” if it is singular or “P” if it is plural.

1. *Neither rain nor snow* _____
2. *Crowd of rowdy fans* _____
3. *Media* _____
4. *Criterion* _____
5. *One or two* _____
6. *Everything* _____
7. *Either of the candidates* _____
8. *Phenomena* _____

Circle the subject in each sentence, and choose the correct verb.

9. *Neither of the cars (is/are) equipped with antilock brakes.*
10. *The flock of geese (was/were) startled by the shotgun blast.*
11. *The data on my computer (was/were) completely erased when the power failed.*
12. *Mathematics and history (is/are) my favorite subjects.*
13. *None of the roast (was/were) eaten.*
14. *All of the games (was/were) played on real grass fields.*
15. *Pride and Prejudice (is/are) my favorite Jane Austen novel.*
16. *Neither of the twins (is/are) allergic to penicillin.*
17. *Much of what I hear in those lectures (goes/go) in one ear and out the other.*
18. *Amy, along with Jamie and Jen, (is/are) applying to Mount Holyoke.*
19. *None of the books (was/were) considered fit for public consumption.*
20. *All of the eggplant (was/were) used to make the sauce.*
21. *Amid the lilies and wildflowers (was/were) one solitary rose.*
22. *Either Ben or his brothers (is/are) in charge of bringing the drinks.*
23. *There (is/are) hardly even a speck of dirt left on the carpet.*
24. *“Stop right there!” (shouts/shout) the Bailey brothers, who are standing in front of me.*
25. *Either the Donovans or Dave (is/are) going to bring the plates.*
26. *There (is/are) at least a hundred people here.*

“Uninvert” the following sentences so that the verb follows the subject, then choose the correct verb form.

27. *There (is/are), in my opinion, far too many smokers in this restaurant.*

28. *Over that hill (is/are) thousands of bison.*

29. *Riding on the bus among the children (was/were) over a dozen commuters.*

30. *Never before (has/have) there been such voices heard here.*

31. *Absent from the article (was/were) any mention of the director’s previous Broadway failures.*

Worksheet 1: Subject-Verb Disagreement

Label each verb in the following sentences with a "V" and each subject with an "S." If any verbs are incorrect, cross them out and write the correct form in the blank.

1. *We were horrified to discover that there was more than three mice living in the attic.* _____
2. *Either the president or one of her aides are going to coordinate the project.* _____
3. *There is nearly always two or three guards posted at each entrance.* _____
4. *Every player on both the Falcons and the Rockets were at the party after the game.* _____
5. *There has been a theater and a toy store in the mall ever since it opened.* _____
6. *Either Eric or his brother is hosting the party this year.* _____
7. *There is no fewer than six crayons in this box.* _____
8. *The therapy can resume as planned because neither of the twins are allergic to penicillin.* _____
9. *The proceeds from the sale of every auctioned item goes to charity.* _____
10. *Economics, particularly with its dependence on the behavior of consumers and producers, has always struck me as more of a human science than a mathematical one.* _____
11. *There is more than three years remaining on her contract.* _____
12. *Neither of the girls were frightened by the wild animals that scurried incessantly past their tent.* _____
13. *The technology behind high-definition television, DVDs, and CDs have transformed nearly every aspect of the home entertainment industry.* _____
14. *Every player on both teams were concerned about the goalie's injury.* _____
15. *The company's sponsorship of charitable foundations and mentorship programs have garnered many commendations from philanthropic organizations.* _____
16. *Neither the children nor their parents utters a word when Mrs. Denny tells her stories.* _____
17. *How important is your strength training and your diet to your daily regimen?* _____