



University of Houston Law Center
LEGAL WRITING CENTER

Writing is Thinking

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Writing Tip of the Week
Subject-Verb Agreement—Part 1

Agreement is matching the form of one word to another. Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs.

1. A Subject and Its Verb Must Agree Even When They Are Separated by Other Words.

Sometimes the simple subject is separated from the verb by other words. Make sure the verb agrees with the subject and not with another noun that falls between.

Incorrect *Homer's custom-made towels imprinted with the trademark "Disco Stu" logo is for sale.*

Correct *Homer's custom-made towels imprinted with the trademark "Disco Stu" logo are for sale.*

The verb should read *are* because the subject of the sentence is *towels*, not *logo*.

***Intervening words that begin with expressions such as *accompanied by*, *as well as*, *in addition to*, *with*, *together with*, or *along with* do not change the number of the subject, because these expressions are considered prepositions and not coordinating conjunctions.

Correct *The defendant's voracious appetite, as well as his unusually large mouth, makes me think, "tis not a man...tis a remorseless eating machine."*

2. Two or More Subjects Joined by And Usually Take a Plural Verb.

The rule does not change even if one or all of the subjects are singular.

Correct *Homer and Barney are drinking buddies.*

Exception Occasionally two or more parts of a subject make up one idea or refer to one person or thing. In such cases use a singular verb.

Correct *Mr. Burns's heir and beneficiary is to be Mr. Smithers.*

3. Subjects Joined by Or or Nor Take Verbs That Agree with the Part of the Subject Nearest to the Verb.

Correct *Neither Apu nor the members of the NRA are in favor of Homer having a gun.*

Correct *Neither the members of the NRA nor Apu is in favor of Homer having a gun.*

4. Most Indefinite Pronouns Take Singular Verbs.

The most common indefinite pronouns are: *all*, *any*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *each*, *either*, *everyone*, *everybody*, *everything*, *neither*, *nobody*, *no one*, *none*, *somebody*, *someone*, and *something*.

Correct *Everybody drinking beers at Moe's has been arrested at least once for being drunk in public.*

Exception A few indefinite pronouns—*none*, *all*, *most*, *some*, *any*, and *half*—may take either a singular or plural verb depending on the noun to which they refer.

Correct *Half of Homer's brain has turned to hops.*

Correct *Half of the beers are in Homer's stomach.*

Adapted from: *The New St. Martin's Handbook*—Lunsford & Connors
The Legal Writing Handbook—Oates, Enquist, & Kunsch
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