

Chapter 1

Grammar

Finding Subjects and Verbs

Note

We will use the standard here of underlining subjects once and verbs twice.

Being able to find the right subject and verb will help you correct errors of agreement.

Example: The list of items is/are on the desk.

If you know that *list* is the subject, then you will choose *is* for the verb.

Being able to identify the subject and verb correctly will also help you with commas and semicolons as you will see later.

Definition. A **Verb** is a word that shows action (*runs, hits, slides*) or state of being (*is, are, was, were, am, and so on*).

Examples: He ran around the block.

You are my friend.

Rule 1. If a verb follows *to*, it is called an infinitive phrase and is not the main verb. You will find the main verb either before or after the infinitive phrase.

Examples: I like to walk.

The efforts to get her elected succeeded.

Definition. A **Subject** is the noun or pronoun that performs the verb.

Example: The woman hurried.

Woman is the subject.

Rule 2. A subject will come before a phrase beginning with *of*.

Example: A bouquet of yellow roses will lend color and fragrance to the room.

Rule 3. To find the subject and verb, always find the verb first. Then ask who or what performed the verb.

*Examples: The jet engine passed inspection. Passed is the verb. Who or what passed? The engine, so engine is the subject. If you included the word jet as the subject, lightning will not strike you. Technically, jet is an adjective here and is part of what is known as the complete subject.
From the ceiling hung the chandelier. The verb is hung. Now, if you think ceiling is the subject, slow down. Ask who or what hung. The answer is chandelier, not ceiling. Therefore, chandelier is the subject.*

Rule 4. Any request or command such as “Stop!” or “Walk quickly.” has the understood subject *you* because if we ask who is to stop or walk quickly, the answer must be *you*.

*Example: (You) Please bring me some coffee.
Bring is the verb. Who is to do the bringing? You understood.*

Rule 5. Sentences often have more than one subject, more than one verb, or pairs of subjects and verbs.

*Examples: I like cake and he likes ice cream.
Two pairs of subjects and verbs
He and I like cake.
Two subjects and one verb
She lifts weights and jogs daily.
One subject and two verbs*

Subject and Verb Agreement

Basic Rule. The basic rule states that a singular subject takes a singular verb, while a plural subject takes a plural verb.

Note

The trick is in knowing whether the subject is singular or plural. The next trick is recognizing a singular or plural verb.

Hint: Verbs do not form their plurals by adding an *s* as nouns do. In order to determine which verb is singular and which one is plural, think of which verb you would use with *he* or *she* and which verb you would use with *they*.

Example: *talks, talk*

Which one is the singular form? Which word would you use with *he*? We say, "He talks." Therefore, *talks* is singular. We say, "They talk." Therefore, *talk* is plural.

Rule 1. Two singular subjects connected by *or* or *nor* require a singular verb.

Example: *My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today.*

Rule 2. Two singular subjects connected by *either/or* or *neither/nor* require a singular verb as in Rule 1.

Examples: *Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.*

Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.

Rule 3. When *I* is one of the two subjects connected by *either/or* or *neither/nor*, put it second and follow it with the singular verb *am*.

Example: *Neither she nor I am going to the festival.*

Rule 4. When a singular subject is connected by *or* or *nor* to a plural subject, put the plural subject last and use a plural verb.

Example: *The servings bowl or the plates go on that shelf.*

Rule 5. When a singular and plural subject are connected by *either/or* or *neither/nor*, put the plural subject last and use a plural verb.

Example: *Neither Jenny nor the others are available.*

Rule 6. As a general rule, use a plural verb with two or more subjects when they are connected by *and*.

Example: *A car and a bike are my means of transportation.*

Rule 7. Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by words such as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, or *not*. Ignore these expressions when determining whether to use a singular or plural verb.

Examples: *The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.*
Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking .

Rule 8. The pronouns *each, everyone, every one, everybody, anyone, anybody, someone,* and *somebody* are singular and require singular verbs. Do not be misled by what follows *of*.

Examples: *Each of the girls sings well.*
Every one of the cakes is gone.

Note

Everyone is one word when it means *everybody*. *Every one* is two words when the meaning is *each one*.

Rule 9. With words that indicate portions—*percent, fraction, part, majority, some, all, none, remainder,* and so forth—look at the noun in your *of* phrase (object of the preposition) to determine whether to use a singular or plural verb. If the object of the preposition is singular, use a singular verb. If the object of the preposition is plural, use a plural verb.

Examples: *Fifty percent of the pie has disappeared.*
*Pie is the object of the preposition *of*.*
Fifty percent of the pies have disappeared.
Pies is the object of the preposition.
One-third of the city is unemployed.
One-third of the people are unemployed.

Note

Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions.

All of the pie is gone.
All of the pies are gone.

Some of the pie is missing.
Some of the pies are missing.

None of the garbage was picked up.
None of the sentences were punctuated correctly.
Of all her books, none have sold as well as the first one.

Note

Apparently, the SAT testing service considers *none* as a singular word only. However, according to *Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, "Clearly *none* has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. The notion that it is singular only is a myth of unknown origin that appears to have arisen in the 19th century. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. Both are acceptable beyond serious criticism" (p. 664). When *none* is clearly intended to mean *not one* or *not any*, it is followed by a singular verb.

Rule 10. When *either* and *neither* are subjects, they always take singular verbs.

*Examples: Neither of them is available to speak right now.
Either of us is capable of doing the job.*

Rule 11. The words *here* and *there* have generally been labeled as adverbs even though they indicate place. In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the true subject follows the verb.

*Examples: There are four hurdles to jump.
There is a high hurdle to jump.*

Rule 12. Use a singular verb with sums of money or periods of time.

*Examples: Ten dollars is a high price to pay.
Five years is the maximum sentence for that offense.*

Rule 13. Sometimes the pronoun *who*, *that*, or *which* is the subject of a verb in the middle of the sentence. The pronouns *who*, *that*, and *which* become singular or plural according to the noun directly in front of them. So, if that noun is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

*Examples: Salma is the scientist who writes/write the reports.
The word in front of *who* is *scientist*, which is singular.
Therefore, use the singular verb *writes*.
He is one of the men who does/do the work.
The word in front of *who* is *men*, which is plural.
Therefore, use the plural verb *do*.*

Rule 14. Collective nouns such as *team* and *staff* may be either singular or plural depending on their use in the sentence.

*Examples: The staff is in a meeting.
Staff is acting as a unit here.
The staff are in disagreement about the findings.*

The staff are acting as separate individuals in this example. The sentence would read even better as:
The staff members are in disagreement about the findings.

Pronouns

Definition. A **pronoun** is a word that takes the place of a noun. Pronouns can be in one of three cases: Subject, Object, or Possessive.

Rule 1. Subject pronouns are used when the pronoun is the subject of the sentence. You can remember subject pronouns easily by filling in the blank subject space for a simple sentence.

Example: _____ did the job.

I, you, he, she, it, we, and they all fit into the blank and are, therefore, subject pronouns.

Rule 2. Subject pronouns are also used if they rename the subject. They will follow *to be* verbs such as *is, are, was, were, am, and will be*.

Examples: *It is he.*

This is she speaking.

It is we who are responsible for the decision to downsize.

Note

In spoken English, most people tend to follow *to be* verbs with Object pronouns. Many English teachers support (or at least have given in to) this distinction between written and spoken English.

Example: *It could have been them.*

Better: *It could have been they.*

Example: *It is just me at the door.*

Better: *It is just I at the door.*

Rule 3. Object pronouns are used everywhere else (direct object, indirect object, object of the preposition). Object pronouns are *me, you, him, her, it, us, and them*.

Examples: *Jean talked to him.*

Are you talking to me?

To be able to choose pronouns correctly, you must learn to identify clauses. A clause is a group of words containing a verb and subject.

Rule 4a. A **strong clause** can stand on its own.

Examples: *She is* hungry.

I am feeling well today.

Rule 4b. A **weak clause** begins with words such as *although, since, if, when, and because*. Weak clauses cannot stand on their own.

The word *myself* does not refer back to another word.

Correct: *My brother and I did it.*

Incorrect: *Please give it to John or myself.*

Correct: *Please give it to John or me.*

Who vs. Whom

Rule. Use the *he/him* method to decide which word is correct.

he = who

him = whom

Examples: *Who/Whom wrote the letter?*

He wrote the letter. Therefore, *who* is correct.

For who/whom should I vote?

Should I vote for him? Therefore, *whom* is correct.

We all know who/whom pulled that prank.

This sentence contains two clauses: *We all know* and *who/whom pulled that prank*. We are interested in the second clause because it contains the *who/whom*. *He pulled that prank*. Therefore, *who* is correct. (Are you starting to sound like a hooting owl yet?)

We want to know on who/whom the prank was pulled.

This sentence contains two clauses: *We want to know* and *the prank was pulled on who/whom*. Again, we are interested in the second clause because it contains the *who/whom*. The prank was pulled on him. Therefore, *whom* is correct.

Whoever vs. Whomever

Rule 1. To determine whether to use *whoever* or *whomever*, here is the rule:

him + he = whoever

him + him = whomever

Example: *Give it to whoever/whomever asks for it first.*

Give it to *him*. He asks for it first.

Therefore, *Give it to whoever* asks for it first.

Example: *We will hire whoever/whomever you recommend.*

We will hire *him*. You recommend *him*.

him + him = whomever

Example: *We will hire **whoever/whomever** is most qualified.*

We will hire *him*. *He* is most qualified.

him + he = whoever

Rule 2. When the entire *whoever/whomever* clause is the subject of the verb that follows the clause, look inside the clause to determine whether to use *whoever* or *whomever*.

Example: *Whoever is elected will serve a four-year term.*

Whoever is elected is the subject of *will serve*.

Example: *Whomever you elect will serve a four-year term.*

Whomever you elect is the subject of *will serve*.

Whomever is the object of *you elect*.

That vs. Which

Rule 1. *Who* refers to people. *That* and *which* refer to groups or things.

Examples: *Anya is the one **who** rescued the bird.*

*Lokua is on the team **that** won first place.*

*She belongs to an organization **that** specializes in saving endangered species.*

Rule 2. *That* introduces essential clauses while *which* introduces nonessential clauses.

Examples: *I do not trust editorials **that** claim racial differences in intelligence.*

We would not know which editorials were being discussed without the *that* clause.

*The editorial claiming racial differences in intelligence, **which** appeared in the Sunday newspaper, upset me.*

The editorial is already identified. Therefore, *which* begins a nonessential clause.

Note

Essential clauses do not have commas surrounding them while nonessential clauses are surrounded by commas.

Rule 3. If *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* have already introduced an essential clause, you may use *which* to introduce the next clause, whether it is essential or nonessential.

Examples: *That* is a decision **which** you must live with for the rest of your life.

Those ideas, **which** we've discussed thoroughly enough, do not need to be addressed again.

Note

Often, you can streamline your sentence by leaving out *which*.

Example: *Those* ideas, **which** we have discussed thoroughly, do not need to be addressed again.

Better: *The* ideas we have discussed thoroughly do not need to be addressed again.

Example: *That* is a decision **which** you must live with for the rest of your life.

Better: *That* is a decision you must live with for the rest of your life.

OR

You must live with **that** decision for the rest of your life.

Adjectives and Adverbs

Definitions: Adjectives are words that describe nouns or pronouns. They may come before the word they describe (That is a *cute* puppy.) or they may follow the word they describe (That puppy is *cute*.).

Rule 1. Adverbs are words that modify everything but nouns and pronouns. They modify adjectives, verbs, and other adverbs. A word is an adverb if it answers *how*, *when*, or *where*. The only adverbs that cause grammatical problems are those that answer the question *how*, so focus on these.

Example: *He* speaks **slowly**.

Answers the question *how*.

Example: *He* speaks **very** slowly.

Answers the question *how* slowly.

Rule 2. Generally, if a word answers the question *how*, it is an adverb. If it can have an *-ly* added to it, place it there.

Examples: *She* thinks **slow/slowly**.

She thinks *how*? **slowly**.

She is a **slow/slowly** thinker.

Slow does not answer *how*, so no *-ly* is attached. *Slow* is an adjective here.

She thinks **fast/fastly**.

Fast answers the question *how*, so it is an adverb. But *fast* never has an *-ly* attached to it.

We performed bad/badly.

Badly describes *how* we performed.

Rule 3. A special *-ly* rule applies when four of the senses—*taste, smell, look, feel*—are the verbs. Do not ask if these senses answer the question *how* to determine if *-ly* should be attached. Instead, ask if the sense verb is being used actively. If so, use the *-ly*.

Examples: *Roses smell sweet/sweetly.*

Do the roses actively smell with noses? No, so no *-ly*.

The woman looked angry/angrily.

Did the woman actively look with eyes or are we describing her appearance? We are only describing appearance, so no *-ly*.

The woman looked angry/angrily at the paint splotches.

Here the woman did actively look with eyes, so the *-ly* is added.

She feels bad/badly about the news.

She is not feeling with fingers, so no *-ly*.

Good vs. Well

Rule 4. The word *good* is an adjective, while *well* is an adverb.

Examples: *You did a good job.*

Good describes the job.

You did the job well.

Well answers how.

You smell good today.

Describes your odor, not how you smell with your nose, so follow with the adjective.

You smell well for someone with a cold.

You are actively smelling with a nose here, so follow with the adverb.

Rule 5. When referring to health, use *well* rather than *good*.

Examples: *I do not feel well.*

You do not look well today.

Note

You may use *good* with *feel* when you are not referring to health.

Example: *I feel good about my decision to learn Spanish.*

Rule 6. A common error in using adjectives and adverbs arises from using the wrong form for comparison. For instance, to describe one thing we would say *poor*, as in, “She is *poor*.” To compare two things, we should say *poorer*, as in, “She is the *poorer* of the two women.” To compare more than two things, we should say *poorest*, as in, “She is the *poorest* of them all.”

<i>Examples:</i>	One	Two	Three or More
	<i>sweet</i>	<i>sweeter</i>	<i>sweetest</i>
	<i>bad</i>	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
	<i>efficient*</i>	<i>more efficient*</i>	<i>most efficient*</i>

Note

Usually with words of three or more syllables, don't add *-er* or *-est*.
Use *more* or *most* in front of the words.

Rule 7. Never drop the *-ly* from an adverb when using the comparison form.

Correct: *She spoke quickly.*
She spoke more quickly than he did.

Incorrect: *She spoke quicker than he did.*

Correct: *Talk quietly.*
Talk more quietly.

Incorrect: *Talk quieter.*

Rule 8. When *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* are followed by nouns, they are adjectives. When they appear without a noun following them, they are pronouns.

Examples: *This house is for sale.*
This is an adjective here.
This is for sale.
This is a pronoun here.

Rule 9. *This* and *that* are singular, whether they are being used as adjectives or as pronouns. *This* points to something nearby, while *that* points to something “over there.”

Examples: *This dog is mine.*
That dog is hers.
This is mine.
That is hers.

Rule 10. *These* and *those* are plural, whether they are being used as adjectives or as pronouns. *These* points to something nearby while *those* points to something “over there.”

Examples: *These babies have been smiling for a long time.*

These are mine.

Those babies have been crying for hours.

Those are yours.

Rule 11. Use *than* to show comparison. Use *then* to answer the question *when*.

Examples: *I would rather go skiing than rock climbing.*

First we went skiing; then we went rock climbing.

Problems with Prepositions

Rule 1. You may end a sentence with a preposition. Just do not use extra prepositions when the meaning is clear without them.

Examples:

Correct: *That is something I cannot agree with.*

That is something with which I cannot agree.

Correct: *How many of you can I count on?*

Correct: *Where did he go?*

Incorrect: *Where did he go to?*

Correct: *Where did you get this?*

Incorrect: *Where did you get this at?*

Correct: *I will go later.*

Incorrect: *I will go later on.*

Correct: *Take your shoes off the bed.*

Incorrect: *Take your shoes off of the bed.*

Correct: *You may look out the window.*

Incorrect: *You may look out of the window.*

Correct: *Cut it into small pieces.*

Incorrect: *Cut it up into small pieces.*

Rule 2. Use *on* with expressions that indicate the time of an occurrence.

Examples: *He was born on December 23.*

We will arrive on the fourth.

Rule 3. *Of* should never be used in place of *have*.

Correct: *I should have done it.*

Incorrect: *I should of done it.*

Rule 4. *Between* refers to two. *Among* is used for three or more.

Examples: *Divide the candy between the two of you.*
Divide the candy among the three of you.

Rule 5. *Into* implies entrance; *in* does not.

Examples: *Sofia walked into the house.*
Sofia was waiting in the house.
Miriam came in to see me today.
In is part of the verb phrase *came in*, while *to* is part of *to see*.

Rule 6. The word *like*, when used to show comparison, is a preposition, meaning that it should be followed by an object of the preposition but not by a subject and verb. Use the connectors (also called conjunctions) *as* or *as if* when following a comparison with a subject and verb.

Examples: *You look so much like your mother.*
Mother is the object of the preposition *like*.
You look as if you are angry.
As if is connecting two pairs of subjects and verbs.

Effective Writing

Rule 1. Use concrete rather than vague language.

Examples:
Vague: *The weather was of an extreme nature on the west coast.*
Concrete: *California had very cold weather last week.*

Rule 2. Use active voice whenever possible. Active voice means the subject is performing the verb.

Examples:
Active: *Barry hit the ball.*
Passive: *The ball was hit.*

Notice that the responsible party may not even appear when using passive voice.

Rule 3. Avoid overusing *there is*, *there are*, *it is*, *it was*, and so on.

Example: *There is a case of meningitis that was reported in the newspaper.*
Correction: *A case of meningitis was reported in the newspaper.*
Even Better: *The newspaper reported a case of meningitis.* (Active voice)

Example: *It is important to signal before making a left turn.*

Correction: *Signaling before making a left turn is important.*

OR

Signaling before a left turn is important.

OR

You should signal before making a left turn. (Active voice)

Example: *There are some revisions which must be made.*

Correction: *Some revisions must be made.*

Even Better: *Please make some revisions.* (Active voice)

Rule 4. To avoid confusion, don't use two negatives to make a positive.

Incorrect: *He is not unwilling to help.*

Correct: *He is willing to help.*

Rule 5. Use similar grammatical form when offering several ideas. This is called parallel construction.

Correct: *You should check your spelling, grammar, and punctuation.*

Incorrect: *You should check your spelling, grammar, and punctuating.*

Rule 6. If you start a sentence with an action, place the actor immediately after or you will have created the infamous dangling modifier.

Incorrect: *While walking across the street, the bus hit her.*

Correct: *While walking across the street, she was hit by a bus.*

OR

She was hit by a bus while walking across the street.

Rule 7. Place modifiers near the words they modify.

Incorrect: *I have some pound cake Mollie baked in my lunch bag.*

Correct: *In my lunch bag, I have some pound cake that Mollie baked.*

Rule 8. A sentence fragment occurs when you have only a phrase or weak clause but are missing a strong clause.

Example of Sentence Fragment: *After the show ended.*

Example of Sentence: *After the show ended, we had coffee.*