

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

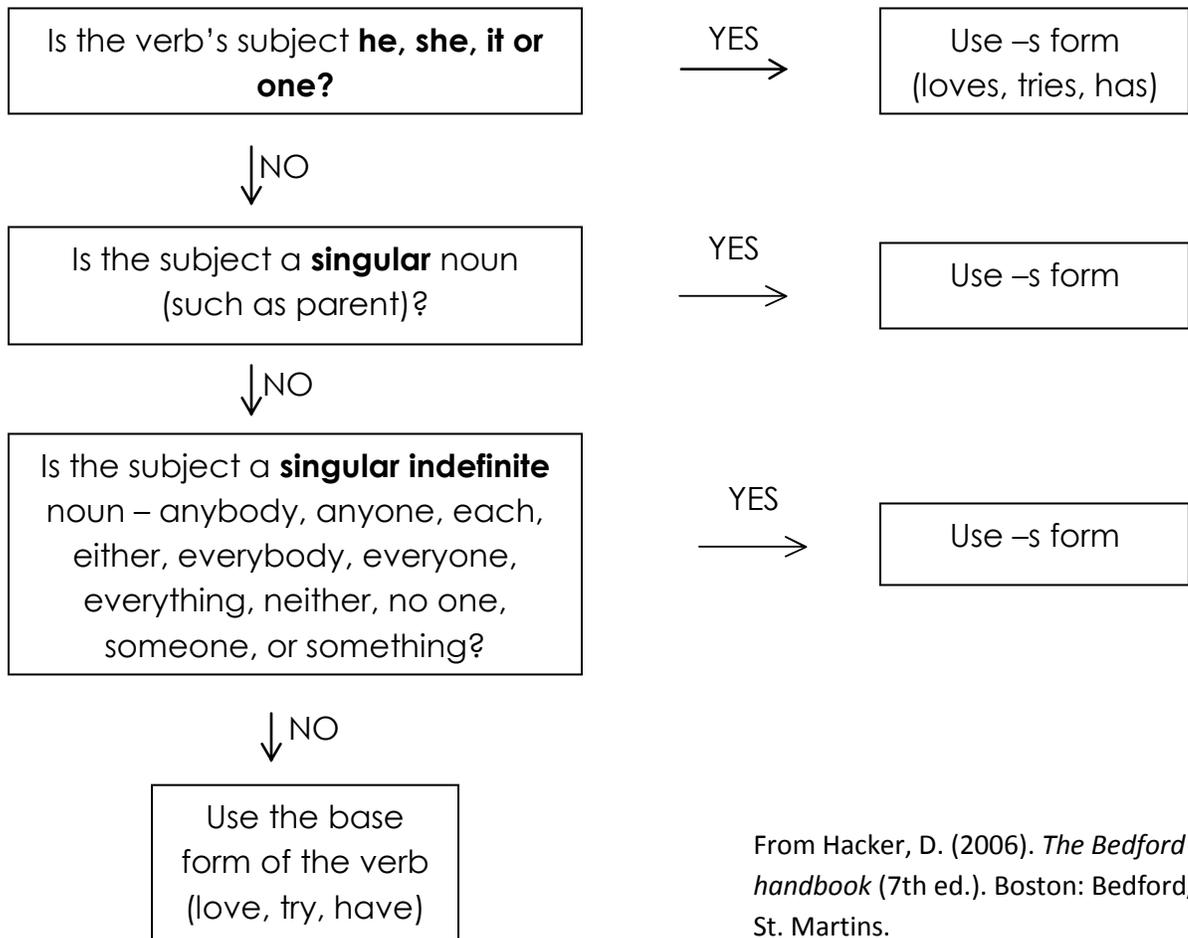
Most native English speakers know the standard verb-subject combinations by ear. Examples of these combinations are *he talks*, not *he talk* and *she has*, not *she have*.

However, if you don't trust your ear or you find simple sentence formations confusing, just follow these simple rules and you will be ready to write flawless sentences in no time!

- In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in NUMBER (singular/plural) and in PERSON (first, second, or third). The present tense ending **-s (or -es)** is used on a verb if the subject is THIRD PERSON SINGULAR. Otherwise, the verb takes NO ENDING.

	SINGULAR		PLURAL	
First Person	I	love	We	love
Second Person	You	love	you	love
Third Person	He/she/it	loves	They	love

- If the concept still confuses you, try answering the following questions to understand when to use the **-s (or -es)** form of a present tense verb.



From Hacker, D. (2006). *The Bedford handbook* (7th ed.). Boston: Bedford/ St. Martins.

- After learning the basic fundamentals of subject-verb agreement, read and understand these special rules and after some practice, forming correct sentences will be easy!

1. Make the verb agree with its subject, not with the word in between

High levels of pollution **cause** damage to the respiratory tract

The subject is **levels**, NOT pollution

2. With subjects joined with or, nor, either...or, or neither... nor, make the verb agree with the part of the subject **NEARER** to the verb

A driver's license or credit card **is** required

See, the term "driver's license" was not used in making the verb agree the sentence. Instead it was the term "credit card"

Neither the lab assistant nor the students **were** able to download the information

3. Treat most indefinite pronouns as SINGULAR

Anybody	Each	Everyone	Nobody	Somebody
Anyone	Either	Everything	No one	Someone
Anything	Everybody	Neither	Nothing	Something

Everybody who signed up for the snowboarding trip **was** taking lessons

Everyone on the team **supports** the coach

4. However, a few indefinite nouns such as ALL, ANY, NONE and SOME may be singular or plural DEPENDING on the noun or pronoun they refer to.

Some of our luggage **was** lost

None of his advice **makes** sense

5. Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb

There **are** surprisingly few children in our neighbourhood

There **were** a social worker and a crew of twenty volunteers at the scene of the accident

6. Words such as athletics, economics, measles and news are usually SINGULAR, despite their plural form

Statistics **is** among the most difficult courses in our program

7. Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as words, and gerund phrases are SINGULAR

Lost Cities **describes** the discoveries of many ancient civilizations

Delmonico Brothers **specializes** in organic produce and additive-free meats.

8. Treat collective nouns (e.g. team, audience, crowd, class, family) as SINGULAR unless the meaning is clearly plural

1. SINGULAR

Collective nouns nearly always emphasize a group as a UNIT

The class **respects** the teacher

The board of trustees **meets** in Denver twice a year

2. PLURAL

Occasionally, a collective noun is treated as plural to draw attention to the INDIVIDUAL members of the group

The class **are** debating amongst themselves

If that is the case, it is better to change it to:

The class members **are** debating amongst themselves

Now try answering these exercises to measure how much you learned!

EXERCISE 1

Underline the subject (or compound subject) and then identify the verb that agrees with it.

Everyone in the telecom focus group (has/have) experienced problems with cell phones

1. Your friendship over the years and your support (has/have) meant a great deal to us.
2. Hamilton Family Center, a shelter for teenage runaways in San Francisco, (offers/offer) a wide variety of services.
3. The main source of income for Trinidad (is/are) oil and pitch.
4. The chances of your being promoted (is/are) excellent.
5. There (was/were) a Pokémon card stuck to the refrigerator.
6. Neither the professor nor his assistants (was/were) able to solve the mystery of the eerie glow in the laboratory.
7. Many hours at the driving range (has/have) led us to design golf balls with GPS locators in them.
8. Discovered in the soil of our city garden (was/were) a button dating from the Civil War dating from the turn of the century.
9. Every year, during the midsummer festival, the smoke of village bonfires (fills/fill) the sky.
10. The story performers (was/were) surrounded by children and adults eager to see magical tales.

EXERCISE 2

Edit the following sentences to eliminate problems with subject-verb agreement and write the edited sentence. If a sentence is correct, write "correct."

Jack's first days in the infantry was gruelling
Jack's first days in the infantry **were** gruelling

1. One of the main reasons for elephant poaching are the profits received from selling the ivory tusks.
2. Not until my interview with Dr. Chang were other possibilities opened to me.
3. Batik cloth from Bali, blue and white ceramics from Cambodia, and a bocce ball from Turin has made Hannah's room the talk of the dorm.
4. The board of directors, ignoring the wishes of the neighbourhood, has voted to allow further development.
5. Measles is a contagious childhood disease.
6. The presence of certain bacteria in our bodies are one of the factors that determines our overall health.
7. Leah is the only one of the many applicants who has the ability to step into this job.
8. Neither the explorer nor his companions was ever seen again.

ANSWER KEY- Exercise 1

1. Your friendship over the years and your support (has/have) meant a great deal to us.
2. Hamilton Family Center, a shelter for teenage runaways in San Francisco, (offers/offer) a wide variety of services.
3. The main source of income for Trinidad (is/are) oil and pitch.
4. The chances of your being promoted (is/are) excellent.
5. There (was/were) a Pokémon card stuck to the refrigerator.
6. Neither the professor nor his assistants (was/were) able to solve the mystery of the eerie glow in the laboratory.
7. Many hours at the driving range (has/have) led us to design golf balls with GPS locators in them.
8. Discovered in the soil of our city garden (was/were) a button dating from the Civil War dating from the turn of the century.
9. Every year, during the midsummer festival, the smoke of village bonfires (fills/fill) the sky.
10. The story performers (was/were) surrounded by children and adults eager to see magical tales.

ANSWER KEY- Exercise 2

1. One of the main reasons for elephant poaching is the profits received from selling the ivory tusks.
2. CORRECT
3. Batik cloth from Bali, blue and white ceramics from Cambodia, and a bocce ball from Turin have made Hannah's rooms the talk of the dorm.
4. CORRECT
5. CORRECT
6. The presence of certain bacteria in our bodies is one of the factors that determine our overall health.
7. CORRECT
8. Neither the explorer nor his companions were ever seen again.

Information and exercises from: Hacker, D. (2006). *The Bedford handbook* (7th ed.). Boston: Bedford/ St. Martins.