**MODULE 4**

**SUBJECT VERB AGREEMENT**

**Basic Rule.**

A singular subject (she, he, car) takes a singular verb (is, goes, shines), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

OR

The subject should agree with the verb in number and person

If you know that the word list in a sentence is the subject, then you will choose it for the verb.

**Rule 1. Use verbs that agree with a subject, not with a noun that is part of a modifying phrase or clause between verb and subject:**

“The pot of eggs is boiling on the stove.”

**Rule 2. Use singular or plural verbs that agree with the subject, not with the complement of the subject:**

“My favorite type of movie is comedies,” but “Comedies are my favorite type of movie.”

**Rule 3. Use singular verbs with singular indefinite pronouns — each, the “-bodies,” “-ones,” and “-things” (anybody, everyone, nothing), and the like:**

“Neither is correct.” (And, just as in rule number 1, the presence of a modifier is irrelevant: “Neither of them is correct.”)

**Rule 4. Use plural verbs with plural indefinite pronouns:**

“Many outcomes are possible.”

**Rule 5. Use singular verbs with uncountable nouns that follow an indefinite pronoun:**

“All the paint is dried up.”

**Rule 6. Use plural verbs with countable nouns that follow an indefinite pronoun:**

“All the nails are spilled on the floor.”

**Rule 7. Use plural verbs with compound subjects that include and:**

“The dog and the cat are outside.”

**Rule 8. Use plural verbs or singular verbs, depending on the form of the noun nearest the verb, with compound subjects that include nor or or:**

“Either the dog or the cats are responsible for the mess.” (“Either the cats or the dog is responsible for the mess” is also technically correct but is awkward.)

**Rule 9. Use singular verbs with inverted subjects that include singular nouns:**

“Why is my hat outside in the rain?”

**Rule 10. Use plural verbs with inverted subjects (those beginning with the expletive there rather than the actual subject) that include plural nouns:**

“There are several hats outside in the rain.”

**Rule 11. Use singular or plural verbs with collective nouns depending on meaning:**

“His staff is assembled,” but “Staff are asked to go to the conference room immediately.” (In the first sentence, the emphasis is on the body of employees; in the second sentence, the focus is on compliance by each individual in the body of employees.)

**Rule 12. Use singular verbs for designations of entities, such as nations or organizations, or compositions, such as books or films:**

“The United Nations is headquartered in New York.”

**Rule 13. Use singular verbs for subjects plural in form but singular in meaning:**

“Physics is my favorite subject.”

**Rule 14. Use singular or plural verbs for subjects plural in form but plural or singular in meaning depending on the context:**

“The economics of the situation are complicated,” but “Economics is a complicated topic.”

**Rule 15. Use plural verbs for subjects plural in form and meaning:**

“The tweezers are in the cupboard.”

**Rule 16. Use plural verbs in constructions of the form “one of those (blank) who . . .”**

“I am one of those eccentrics who do not tweet.”

**Rule 17. Use singular verbs in constructions of the form “the only one of those (blank) who . . .”:**

“I am the only one of my friends who does not tweet.”

**Rule 18. Use singular verbs in constructions of the form “the number of (blank) . . .”:**

“The number of people here boggles the mind.”

**Rule 19. Use plural verbs in constructions of the form “a number of (blank) . . .”:**

“A number of people here disagree.”

**Rule 20. Use singular verbs in construction of the forms “every (blank) . . .” and “many a (blank) . . .”**

“Every good boy does fine”; “Many a true word is spoken in jest.”

**Rule 21. A subject will come before a phrase beginning with of. This is a key rule for understanding** subjects. The word of is the culprit in many, perhaps most, subject-verb mistakes.

Hasty writers, speakers, readers, and listeners might miss the all-too-common mistake in the following sentence:

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

Correct: A bouquet of yellow roses lends . . . (bouquet lends, not roses lend)

**Rule22. Two singular subjects connected by or, either/or, or neither/nor require a singular verb.**

Examples: My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today. Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.

Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.

**Rule 23. The verb in an or, either/or, or neither/nor sentence agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it.**

Examples: Neither the plates nor the serving bowl goes on that shelf.

Neither the serving bowl nor the plates go on that shelf.

This rule can lead to bumps in the road. For example, if I is one of two (or more) subjects, it could lead to this odd sentence:

Awkward: Neither she, my friends, nor I am going to the festival.

If possible, it’s best to reword such grammatically correct but awkward sentences.

Better: Neither she, I, nor my friends are going to the festival.

OR

She, my friends, and I are not going to the festival.

**Rule24. 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.

But note these exceptions:

Exceptions: Breaking and entering is against the law. The bed and breakfast was charming.

In those sentences, breaking and entering and bed and breakfast are compound nouns.

Rule 25. Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by such words as along with, as well as, besides, not, etc. These words and phrases are not part of the subject. Ignore them and use a singular verb when the subject is singular.

Examples:

The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.

Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.

**Rule 26. With words that indicate portions—percent, fraction, majority, some, all, etc.—Rule 1 given earlier is reversed, and we are guided by the noun after of. If the noun after of is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.**

Examples: Fifty percent of the pie has disappeared. Fifty percent of the pies have disappeared.

A third of the city is unemployed.

A third of the people are unemployed.

All of the pie is gone.

All of the pies are gone.

Some of the pie is missing.

Some of the pies are missing.

**Rule 27. 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.

Here are the keys.

The word there’s, a contraction of there is, leads to bad habits in informal sentences like There’s a lot of people here today, because it’s easier to say “there’s” than “there are.” Take care never to use there’s with a plural subject.

**Rule 28. Use a singular verb with distances, periods of time, sums of money, etc., when considered as a unit.**

Examples:

Three miles is too far to walk.

Five years is the maximum sentence for that offense.

Ten dollars is a high price to pay.

BUT

Ten dollars (i.e., dollar bills) were scattered on the floor.

**Rule 29. Some collective nouns, such as family, couple, staff, audience, etc., may take either a singular or a plural verb, depending on their use in the sentence.**

Examples:

The staff is in a meeting.

Staff is acting as a unit.

The couple disagree about disciplining their child.

The couple refers to two people who are acting as individuals.

Anyone who uses a plural verb with a collective noun must take care to be accurate—and also consistent. It must not be done carelessly.

The following is the sort of flawed sentence one sees and hears a lot these days:

The staff is deciding how they want to vote.

Careful speakers and writers would avoid assigning the singular is and the plural they to staff in the same sentence.

Consistent: The staff are deciding how they want to vote.

Rewriting such sentences is recommended whenever possible. The preceding sentence would read even better as:

The staff members are deciding how they want to vote.

**Rule 30.** The word were replaces was in sentences that express a wish or are contrary to fact:

Example: If Joe were here, you’d be sorry.

Shouldn’t Joe be followed by was, not were, given that Joe is singular? But Joe isn’t actually here, so we say were, not was. The sentence demonstrates the subjunctive mood, which is used to express things that are hypothetical, wishful, imaginary, or factually contradictory. The subjunctive mood pairs singular subjects with what we usually think of as plural verbs.

Examples:

I wish it were Friday.

She requested that he raise his hand.

In the first example, a wishful statement, not a fact, is being expressed; therefore, were which we usually think of as a plural verb, is used with the singular subject I.

Normally, he raise would sound terrible to us. However, in the second example, where a request is being expressed, the subjunctive mood is correct.

The subjunctive mood is losing ground in spoken English but should still be used in formal speech and writing.