

Common Grammar Errors

English grammar can sometimes be confusing. In this handout, we have identified some of the most common errors college students make in their writing and provided explanations for how to fix them. If you have a grammar question that is not answered by this handout, please visit the Writing Center.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement means that the subject and verb of a sentence must match in person (first, second, or third) and in number (singular or plural).

Identifying the Person

First Person: First person uses the pronoun “I” as the subject. It is written as though the writer is talking about themselves. **It requires the plural form of the verb (except the verb “to be”).**

Second Person: Second person uses the pronoun “You” as the subject. It is written as though the writer is talking to a specific audience. **It requires the plural form of the verb.**

Third Person: Third person uses **all nouns and pronouns (except “I” and “You”)** as the subject. It is written as though the writer is standing outside the action and describing what others are doing. **The form of the verb depends on whether the third person subject is singular or plural.**

Identifying Singular and Plural Subjects

To find the subject, look for who or what is doing the action of the sentence.

Singular Subjects

Singular subjects include singular nouns, singular pronouns, and noncount nouns.

- **Singular Nouns:** Singular nouns are words that **represent one of something**. Examples include “dog,” “house,” “book,” “concept,” etc.
- **Singular Pronouns:** Singular pronouns are words that stand in to **represent singular nouns**. They include “he,” “she,” and “it.” (While “I” and “you” are singular, their subject-verb agreement is dictated by person rather than tense.)
- **Noncount Nouns:** Noncount nouns are words that **represent groups or items that are difficult to separate** into individual pieces. While they may be made up of multiple individuals, they are considered one thing. Examples include “water,” “sand,” “air,” “butter,” “clothing,” “research,” “rain,” “advice,” “honesty,” etc.

Plural Subjects

Plural subjects include regular and irregular plural nouns, plural pronouns, and compound subjects.

- **Regular Plural Nouns:** Most nouns **show plurality by ending in “s.”** Examples include “dogs,” “houses,” “books,” “concepts,” etc.
- **Irregular Plural Nouns:** Some nouns **do not follow the “add -s” rule**. Examples include “wolves,” “bosses,” “echoes,” “theories,” “sheep,” “feet,” etc.
- **Plural Pronouns:** Plural pronouns **represent plural nouns**. These are “we” and “they.”
- **Compound Subjects:** A compound subject is made up of **two or more nouns connected using “and.”** Examples include the following: John and Mary; you and me; the girl and the dog; a pen, paper, and book.

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Verb Tenses and Agreement

A verb tense indicates the time when an action occurs (Ex: Past, Present, Future). There are 12 verb tenses. However, not all of them require you to make changes to the verb to achieve subject-verb agreement.

Simple Present Tense: An “s” is added to the end of singular present tense verbs to show agreement with singular subjects. Plural present tense verbs do not end an “s.”

Example Singular: The dog **jumps** over the fence.

Example Plural: The dogs **jump** over the fence.

Verb Tenses with Helping Verbs: Some verb tenses use helping verbs along with the main verb. If there is only one of these helping verbs, then agreement must be shown. This rule only applies to the following helping verbs: is/are, was/were, has/have, does/do.

Example Singular: The girl **was dancing** with her friend.

Example Plural: The girls **were dancing** with their friend.

If the helping verb “have/has” is the second helping verb in a pair, then agreement is not indicated.

Example Singular: The girl **should have danced** with her friend

Example Plural: The girls **should have danced** with their friend.

Note: The subject is not always next to the verb. They may be separated by phrases or clauses. For the purposes of subject-verb agreement, you will have to identify and ignore the phrases or clauses to get the agreement right.

Example: The pony with the sharp hooves (jump/jumps) the obstacle.

Example Incorrect Subject-Verb Agreement: The pony with the sharp hooves **jump** the obstacle. **Example Correct Subject-Verb Agreement:** The pony (with the sharp hooves) **jumps** the obstacle.

Homophone Confusion

Homophones are words that sound similar but are spelled differently. Below you will find some of the most common confusing homophones.

Their/They're/There; Your/You're; Whose/Who's; Its/It's

Use **Their/Your/Whose/Its** when showing possession.

Example: I'm going over to **their** house.

Example: That is **your** bike.

Example: **Whose** car is parked out front?

Example: The dog ate **its** bone.

Use **They're/You're/Who's/It's** when indicating the use of the “to be” verb in a contraction.

Example: **They're** (they are) going out tonight.

Example: If **you're** (you are) going to the park, take the dog. **Example:** **Who's** coming to dinner?

Example: **It's** (it is) going to be sad if you leave it behind.

Use **There** when indicating location.

Example: The books are over **there** on the desk.

(It might be helpful to think of it in connection with the location indicator “here”—**there**)

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To/Too/Two

Use **To** to form the infinitive verb or as a preposition showing direction.

Example of Infinitive Verb: I'll have **to** see what my sister thinks.

Example of Preposition: She also like going **to** the mountains.

Use **Too** to indicate an extreme or as a replacement for “also”.

Example of Extreme: The water is **too** cold for swimming.

Example of “Also”: I would like to go swimming **too**.

Use **Two** when indicating number.

Example: I have **two** younger sisters.

Than/Then

Use **Than** to compare.

Example: The pie tastes better **than** the cake.

Use **Then** to indicate transitions in time.

Example: I tried the pie. **Then**, I tried the cake.

Farther/Further

Use **Farther** to indicate physical distance.

Example: The farm is **farther** away than I thought.

Use **Further** to indicate figurative, non-physical distance and extension.

Example Figurative Distance: The stock market dropped **further** over the course of the week. **Example Extension:** I need to visit the tutor. **Further**, I want to set up a meeting with the professor.

Apart/A Part

Use **Apart** to indicate separation.

Example: I hope we never have to be **apart**.

Use **A Part** to indicate part of a whole.

Example: This piece is **a part** of the balloon puzzle.

Affect/Effect

Use **Affect** as a verb (to influence).

Example: This pandemic has really **affected** my mood.

Use **Affect** as a noun (emotion).

Example: His **affect** is hard to gauge.

Use **Effect** as a verb (to bring something about).

Example: The ruling **effected** a settlement of the disputes.

Use **Effect** as a noun (result).

Example: This pandemic has had a major **effect** on my mood.

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Modifiers are **words, phrases, and clauses that provide additional information** about another word, phrase, or clause in the sentence. Words that act as modifiers include adjectives (modify nouns) and adverbs (modify verbs, adverbs, and adjectives). Phrases and clauses that act as modifiers also function as adjectives and adverbs. These will be discussed more in the Phrases and Clauses sections.

Example Adjective Modifier: We invited our **wonderful** friends over for a **delicious** dinner.

Example Adverb Modifier: They **happily** agreed to join us.

Example Phrase Modifier: We decided to make **our famous pasta dish**.

Example Clause Modifier: **After buying all the ingredients**, we turned on some music to cook.

Be careful where you place modifiers in the sentence. A **misplaced modifier** is a modifier with ambiguous or illogical placement, making it difficult to determine what word is being modified. A **dangling modifier** is a modifier that does not seem to modify anything in the sentence.

Example Misplaced Modifier: Jackson chatted with me **chopping the salad**. (**Incorrect:** Who is chopping the salad?)

Example Correction: Jackson, **chopping the salad**, chatted with me. (**Correct:** Now it is clear that Jackson was chopping the salad.)

Example Dangling Modifier: **Completing the pasta sauce**, the noodles needed to be boiled.

(**Incorrect:** Who completed the pasta sauce?)

Example Correction: **Completing the pasta sauce**, I needed to boil the noodles. (**Correct:** Now it is clear that I am the subject completing the actions of the sentence.)

Informal Slang vs. Formal Academic Writing

Slang is informal, often spoken, language. While this language is acceptable in everyday speaking and writing, **formal academic writing requires the use of grammatically correct language and usage**.

Linguistic Reductions

Linguistic reductions occur when words get combined or cut short as we speak and some sounds are lost. While this is completely natural in spoken language, it can cause confusion in writing.

Example Informal/Slang Usage: **Arncha gonna** pour that **outta** the bowl **n** replace it with water?

Example Formal Usage: **Aren't you going to** pour that **out of** the bowl **and** replace it with water?

The next two sections will address some common reductions.

Verb + "in" vs. Verb + "ing"

One of the most common linguistic reductions is the dropping of the "g" from the end of verbs ending in "ing" and gerunds (verbs ending in "ing" that act as nouns). Remember to include the "g" in academic writing. When writing the informal/slang version, include an apostrophe in place of the missing "g."

Example Informal/Slang: As I was **waitin'** for the bus, my **writin'** slipped out of my lap.

Example Formal: As I was **waiting** for the bus, my **writing** slipped out of my lap.

Of vs. Have

This informal usage usually occurs in places where **Have** is used in its contracted form ('ve) and sounds like **Of**. Contractions are not used in formal writing.

Example: My sister **would've** been here earlier.

Informal/Slang Usage: My sister **would of** been here earlier.

Formal Usage: My sister **would have** been here earlier.