

Subject-Verb Agreement

Agreement means that the subject and the verb of a sentence or clause match. If a subject is singular, then a singular verb is required; if a subject is plural, then a plural verb is required.

Examples:

Jerry has been training for the marathon for several months. ✓ (Singular subject; singular verb)

The marathon *route* starts at the Verrazano Bridge and passes through all five of the boroughs. ✓ (Singular subject; singular verbs)

Spectators have lined the final mile of the course since early this morning. ✓ (Plural subject; plural verb)

After 26 miles, the *runners* are approaching the finish line of the marathon. ✓ (Plural subject; plural verb)

When the subject and verb do not match, we say that there is a *failure of agreement* between the subject and verb.

Example:

More Broadway *shows* opens in April than in any other month because the eligibility deadline for the Tony awards comes at the end of the month. ✗ (Plural subject; singular verb)

The only absolutely sure way to avoid errors of subject-verb agreement is to identify the subject, identify the verb, and make sure that they agree.



TIP: As you read, circle subjects and underline verbs. Then check for agreement.

It's Not Always That Easy

In complex sentences, problems of subject-verb agreement can be more difficult to spot.

Examples:

Star *performers* in the movies or on television usually earns substantial income from royalties. ✗



Alexander Hamilton, who served as an aide-de-camp to George Washington for four years, were not in combat until Yorktown because Washington considered him an intellectual asset too valuable to risk in battle. ✖

The blue-gray *stones* that edge the flower box beside the curb comes from the shore of Devon, England, carried to Chestertown as ballast by trading ships that visited the once-bustling international port. ✖

In each of these three sentences, the subject and verb do not agree: “performers...earns,” “Alexander Hamilton...were,” and “stones...comes.” However, the errors may not be immediately evident because of the intervening material. In the first sentence, the subject is separated from the verb by *prepositional phrases*. In the second sentence, the subject and the verb are separated by a *parenthetical expression*. In the third sentence, a *clause* intervenes between the subject and the verb.



TIP: You are more likely to get subject-verb agreement questions wrong when there is a word or phrase near the verb that might be mistaken for the subject. Remember, circle the subject and underline the verb, and pay extra attention when reading complex sentences.

Subject-Verb Agreement Turned on Its Head

There are some sentence structures that create special problems. One is inverted sentence structure. In an inverted sentence, the verb precedes the subject.

Examples:

Although the First Amendment to the Constitution does guarantee freedom of speech, the Supreme Court has long recognized that there has to be some *restrictions* on the exercise of this right. ✖

Jennifer must have been doubly pleased that day, for seated in the gallery to watch her receive the award was *her brother, her parents, and her husband*. ✖

In both of these sentences, the subjects and verbs do not agree. The relationships are obscured by the order in which the elements appear in the sentence—the verbs come before the subjects. These sentences should read:

Although the First Amendment to the Constitution does guarantee freedom of speech, the Supreme Court has long recognized that there have to be some *restrictions* on the exercise of this right. ✓

Jennifer must have been doubly pleased that day, for seated in the gallery to watch her receive the award were *her brother, her parents, and her husband*. ✓



With a reassuring smile, the doctor told Janet that the test confirmed that nothing was wrong.

Now the sentence makes it clear that the doctor is using the smile to reassure Janet that the test result was good.



TIP: On test day, remember to read carefully. If you're distracted by anxiety about the test or are rushing through the test you may not notice errors like the one in the sentence above. Try reading aloud (or mouthing the words silently to yourself) to slow yourself down.

Avoid Awkward and Confusing Sentences

Although there are many different ways of being unclear, three problems occur often:

- Unclear adverbs
- Unclear modifiers
- Misplaced modifiers

If you watch out for these three errors in your writing, you will catch most of your mistakes of this kind.

Avoid Unclear Adverbs

The rules for conversation are generally more relaxed than those for writing. When writing, you have to be more exact. There are a few words that you can be careless with in conversation because you can quickly correct any misunderstanding. But when you are writing, you have to make sure that you communicate clearly with your readers.

This is especially true of the adverbs *such as, only, just, even, almost, and nearly*.

Example:

The string section at least needs one more rehearsal before the performance on Sunday, but the rest of the orchestra is already prepared to play.

The speaker seems to say that the string section and some other unnamed parts of the orchestra need more practice, but this statement is inconsistent with the rest of the sentence. What the speaker really means to say is:

The string section needs at least one more rehearsal before the performance on Sunday, but the rest of the orchestra is already prepared to play.

Now the whole sentence makes sense:

Make Sure the Modifier Clearly Modifies

A modifier can be a single word, a phrase, or a dependent clause. To avoid confusion, you need to make sure that your modifier clearly refers to the words they should modify.

Example:

For her science project, Alice looked for a book on how to grow beans without success.

The sentence implies that Alice was looking for a book that would explain how to grow beans unsuccessfully. The confusion is created by the placement of the phrase “without success” close to “how to grow beans.” The ambiguity can be eliminated by rearranging the elements:

For her science project, Alice looked, without success, for a book on how to grow beans.

Or even rewriting it:

For her science project, Alice looked for a book on how to grow beans, but she couldn't find one.

Avoid the Dangerous Dangling Modifier

You may have heard of this grammar problem before. The phrase “dangling modifier” is used to refer to an introductory modifier that is not directly associated with a noun or pronoun that comes almost immediately after the modifier.

Example:

Trimmed to the proper size, fastened securely to the side of the building with heavy bolts, and brightly illuminated, the storeowner admired the sign that announced the opening of her new business.

Ouch! The sentence seems to say that the storeowner was attached to the side of the building. The modifier “dangles” because it isn't really connected to the word “storeowner,” so the reader has to work to figure out what the speaker means. Of course, the sentence is supposed to say that the sign, not the storeowner, was attached:

Trimmed to the proper size, fastened securely to the side of the building with heavy bolts, and brightly illuminated, the sign that announced the opening of her new business was admired by the storeowner.

This version corrects the dangling modifier by making the first important noun following the introductory modifier the noun that the modifier is supposed to modify: sign.

Tell Me a Story

So far we have studied passages that inform or persuade. These passages are only 75 to 150 words. The test will include another, longer type of passage: the story, or literary fiction. On the test, literary passages will be about 400 words long.

In some ways, literary passages are different from informative or persuasive passages. Stories involve characters who develop and interact with one another. They can include dialogue, be told from various points of view, and feature more descriptive language. But even though literary passages develop differently than informative or persuasive ones, the questions asked will largely remain the same as those you have already studied.

Let's look at an example.

Example:

The traveler, young and strong, marched lightly. On his left arm was a shield and in his left hand a javelin; on his back he carried a quiver filled with arrows and in his right hand an unstrung bow. An ocelot followed stealthily behind him.

He came to a rocky ledge presenting him with a good view. To the northwest stretched the beautiful valley of Anahuac, dotted with little villages and farmhouses. Far across the plain, he caught a view of Lake Chalco, and beyond that, the royal hill of Chapultepec with its palaces and cypress forests. In all the New World, there was no scene its rival for beauty.

The ocelot had come and laid its head in his lap. "Come, boy!" he said, standing. "Let us go. A fortune awaits us."

Half an hour's walk brought them to the foot of the mountain, where they came upon a group of Aztec traders reclining on mats in the shade of some oak trees. The traveler understood at a glance the character of the strangers, so he went on without hesitation.

As he approached, some of them rose.

"Is not that an ocelot at his heels?" asked one. "Bring me my javelin!"

By the time the young man came up, the whole party stood armed and ready. "I am very sorry to have disturbed you," he said quietly.

"You seem friendly enough," answered one of the older men, "but the ocelot there—what of him?"

The traveler smiled. "See, he is muzzled."

"You have greatly relieved me! Come sit with us. Bring a mat for the warrior," said the friendly trader. "Now give him bread and meat."



A running conversation began as the young man ate. "My ocelot? I found him orphaned. Now he hunts for me."

"Then you are not a warrior?"

"My father is a merchant from Tihuanco. At times he has traveled with strong trains and even attacked cities that have refused him admission to their market."

"Tepaja! Old Tepaja, of Tihuanco!" The good man grasped the young one's hand enthusiastically. "I knew him well; many years ago we were like brothers, traveling and trading together."

So the merchant talked until the young traveler had eaten his fill; then the traveler rose. "I have no leisure; the city to which I am bound is too far ahead of me. To speak frankly, I am seeking my fortune."

Some questions ask about details in the story:

1. According to the information provided, the traveler was carrying all of the following EXCEPT
 - A. a shield
 - B. a javelin
 - C. a mat
 - D. a quiver
2. Which of the following best describes the traveler's feelings as he approaches the group beneath the trees?
 - A. He is concerned that the men might be hostile but is confident in his ability to use his weapons.
 - B. He recognizes that the men are peaceful traders and approaches them without fear.
 - C. He knows some of the members of the company by sight and expects that they will welcome him back.
 - D. He is uncertain who the men might be or what their intentions are and is ready for a fight.
3. The old merchant is relieved to learn that the ocelot
 - A. hunts antelopes
 - B. is the traveler's companion
 - C. was found in Tihuanco
 - D. is muzzled