

# Subject-Verb Agreement

# Basics

# Subject-Verb Agreement

- Every sentence must contain a subject and a verb.
  - Subject: denotes 'doer'.
  - Verb: denotes 'action' or 'state'.
- *The man walks with a stick.*
  - Here, “man” is the subject and “walks” is the verb.
  - Ask the question 'who' to the verb to know the subject.
    - Who walks? “The man” walks.
- The sentence will only be a fragment if either the subject or the verb is missing.

# Fragment of a Verb

- On the GMAT, a fragment of a verb can never be the right answer.
  - Example:
    - *Jack running towards the tree house.*
- Although “running” is a verb, it is not a *working* verb (present/past participles by themselves are not working verbs); it needs a helping verb to make sense. Thus, a helping verb must be added.
  - Correct: *Jack is (was etc) running towards the tree house.*

# Fragment of a Verb

*Although he loved the game.*

- This sentence is a fragment. It contains no main clause (an independent clause, with its own subject and verb) and only a subordinate clause that cannot stand on its own.

Either a main clause should be added...

- *Although Jack loved the game, he did not think of making it his profession.*

Or, the connecting word should be removed.

- *He loved the game.*

**Note:** connecting words (such as 'although' above) are also called subordinators because they turn clauses they are attached to into subordinate clauses.

# Making Logical Sense

- For a sentence to have a clear meaning, it must make logical sense.
- Correct the following sentence:
  - *The writing of the book which took the author three years is expected to sell over a million copies by this month-end.*
- Logically, it is not the writing of the book that is expected to sell so many copies, but the book itself.

So, the correct sentence should be...

- *The book, which took the author three years to write, is expected to sell over a million copies by this month-end.*

# Subject-Verb Agreement in Number

- In a correct sentence, the subject and the verb must agree in number.
- For a singular subject, the verb must be singular. For a plural subject, the verb must be plural.
  - *The storyteller narrates the tale.*
  - *The storytellers narrate the tale.*
- On the GMAT, determining whether the subject is singular or plural may be difficult because spotting the subject may not always be easy. Finding the correct pair(s) of subject-verb is crucial.

# Subject-Verb Agreement in Number

- Fill in the blank with the appropriate word:
  - *The rich collection of ancient manuscripts (was/were) Roger's most prized possession.*
- Always look carefully at the sentence. In this case, for instance, it is the “collection” that is the subject, and not “manuscripts”! Considering only the words immediately before the blank can often result in error.
- The correct sentence is...
  - *The rich collection of ancient manuscripts was Roger's most prized possession.*



# Finding the Subject

- The subject and verb could be placed far away from each other in the sentence or the subject could be placed in the middle of the sentence, not at the beginning (as is often expected).
- The aforesaid are done in a number of ways on the GMAT, the most common of which are...
  - Use of Prepositional Phrases
  - Use of Subordinate Clauses
  - Use of other Modifiers
  - Use of Appositives

# Finding the Subject – Use of Prepositional Phrases

- A prepositional phrase is introduced between the subject and the verb. Such a phrase can be ignored while trying to spot the subject.
- Fill in the blank:
  - *The trees around the beautiful mansion \_\_\_\_\_ the gift of the first owner. (is/are)*
    - “around the beautiful mansion” is the prepositional phrase, making it difficult to spot the subject-verb pair. Ignore this phrase.
- The subject is “trees”, so the correct verb is “are”.
  - *The trees around the beautiful mansion are the gift of the first owner.*

# Finding the Subject – Use of Subordinate Clauses

- Subordinating clauses, which begin with connecting words, do not make complete sense on their own. Many subordinating clauses act as adjectives or adverbs, and modify other parts of the sentence. Some even function as nouns.
- Fill in the blank:
  - *Although Alexander Pope had many detractors, the English poet who wrote 'The Dunciad' among many classics \_\_\_\_\_ much appreciated. (was/were)*
    - “*who wrote 'The Dunciad' among many classics*” is a subordinate clause which does not dictate the verb. Since the subject “the English poet” is singular, the verb must also be singular.
  - *Although Alexander Pope had many detractors, the English poet who wrote 'The Dunciad' among many classics was much appreciated.*

# Finding the Subject – Use of other Modifiers

- Other words can also function as modifiers, modifying or describing certain parts of the sentence. For instance, present participles (*-ing* forms of the verbs) and past participles (*-ed* or *-en* forms of the verbs) can act as modifiers.
- Fill in the blank.
  - *Dejected, Peter who had once been his fans' favorite \_\_\_\_\_ sitting in a corner. (was/were)*
    - “Dejected” and “who had once been his fans' favorite” are simply modifiers. The subject is “Peter” and hence, “was” is the correct verb.
  - *Dejected, Peter who had once been his fans' favorite was sitting in a corner.*
- **Note:** Commas are at times used to separate modifiers from the rest of the sentence.

# Finding the Subject – Use of Appositives

- An appositive is a noun, pronoun or noun phrase that describes/renames a noun placed right next to it.
- Which of the following is correct?
  - Globalization, *one of the most gripping phenomena of recent times*, has brought everyone great advantages.
  - Globalization, *one of the most gripping phenomena of recent times*, have brought everyone great advantages.
- In the first sentence, the subject “Globalization” is in agreement with the verb “has”. You might get confused into thinking that the second sentence is correct seeing the plural “times” next to the plural “have”. To avoid such confusion, omit the part between commas, which is merely an appositive.

# Multiple Subject-Verb Pairs

- If there are more than one subject-verb pair to be matched, you should look to meaning as the guiding factor to help decide which verb will go with which subject.
- Fill in the blanks:
  - *The societal norms which an individual belonging to that society (is/are) expected to adhere to (is/are) quite often not wholly reasonable.*
    - In the main clause, the subject is “societal norms” so the corresponding verb is “are”. In the subordinate clause, “an individual” is the subject and so the verb is “is”.
  - *The societal norms which an individual belonging to that society is expected to adhere to are quite often not wholly reasonable.*

# Subject-Verb Agreement Special Cases

# 'And' v/s Additive Phrases

- 'And' can join two or more singular (or even plural) subjects to form a compound subject.
  - A compound subject takes a plural verb form.
- Some other words and phrases, called Additive Phrases, can 'add' to a subject.
  - Examples of additive phrases:
    - along with
    - in addition to
    - as well as
    - accompanied by
    - together with
    - including



# 'And' v/s Additive Phrases

- Additive Phrases do not form compound subjects. They function only as modifiers. There is no change in the number of the subject. Thus, singular subjects followed by additive phrases remain singular.

Hence,

Jack and Sam are going for the party.

Jack along with Sam is going for the party.

Such will be the correct responses because “and” leads to a compound subject but “along with”, an additive phrase, does not.

- **Note:** Subjects such as 'Mathematics', activities such as 'aerobics', and diseases such as 'diabetes' are singular.

# 'And' v/s Additive Phrases

- Fill in the blanks:
  - *John and James, despite the illustrious ancestry, \_\_\_\_\_ given no special concessions. (was/were)*
  - *John as well as James, despite the illustrious ancestry, \_\_\_\_\_ given no special concessions. (was/were)*
- Singular subjects do not change into plural when they are followed by additive phrases.
  - *John and James, despite the illustrious ancestry, were given no special concessions.*
  - *John as well as James, despite the illustrious ancestry, was given no special concessions.*

# Confusing with Additives

- In certain cases, the words connected “and” may be thought of as a single unit. So, the subject will be singular. You need to understand the intended meaning.  
*'Hansel and Gretel' is a famous fairy tale.*
- Here, though Hansel and Gretel are two siblings, the name of the story is a single unit. The word “tale” emphasizes that it is singular.
- **Note:** Consider the word following the verb. If it is singular, the verb will most probably be singular too. The word here is “fairy tale” which tells us that the sentence is talking about '*Hansel & Gretel*' as a story and not about Hansel and Gretel, the children.

# 'Or', 'Either...Or', and 'Neither...Nor'

- 'Or', 'either...or', and 'neither...nor' are used to link two nouns.
- If one of the nouns is singular and the other plural, the verb must agree in number with the noun nearest to it.
- When 'either' or 'neither' are used without 'or' or 'nor', they are considered singular and therefore, take singular verbs.

# 'Or', 'Either...Or', and 'Neither...Nor'

- Identify the error in the following sentence:

- *Either the mice or the cat are to be removed.*

- When using 'either...or', the verb must agree in number with the noun nearest to it. Since “cat” (the noun that is closer to verb) is singular, the verb should be singular too.

- *Either the mice or the cat is to be removed.*

# Collective Nouns

- Collective Noun, which denotes a group or collection of people or objects, is considered a single unit. Hence, each requires a singular verb.
- Examples:  
army, committee, crowd, orchestra, fleet, furniture

# Indefinite Pronouns

- An Indefinite Pronoun does not have a specific referent.
- Indefinite Pronouns are almost always considered singular.
  - Pronouns that end in *–one*, *–body* and *–thing* i.e., anyone, anybody, anything; no one, nobody, nothing; someone, somebody, something; everyone, everybody, everything
  - Whatever, whoever
  - Each, every
- However, there are seven indefinite pronouns that, depending on the context, can be either singular or plural.
  - These are: many, more, most, any, none, all, some (MMMANAS)

# Indefinite Pronouns

## Examples:

- Some humility is expected.
- Some students are missing.
- Any milk is healthier than none.
- Any people interested in the event are to register in advance.
- None of the oranges are rotten.
- None of the players is tired.
- All of these books hold interest for me.
- All oil has spilled.
- Fill in the blank:  
*Not one of those seemingly wonderful opportunities \_\_ grabbed by him. (was/were)*  
*Not one of those seemingly wonderful opportunities was grabbed by him.*
- **Note:** 'Not one' is always singular.



# Indefinite Pronouns + Prepositional Phrases

- With indefinite pronouns that can be either singular or plural, the noun object of a prepositional phrase starting with ‘of’ can help determine the number of the subject.
- Fill in the blanks with ‘is’ or ‘are’:
  - *Most of the milk products \_\_\_\_\_ healthy and tasty.*
  - *Most of the milk produced by this dairy \_\_\_\_\_ consumed by the families residing nearby.*
- “milk products” is plural while “milk produced” is singular.
  - *Most of the milk products are healthy and tasty.*
  - *Most of the milk produced by this dairy is consumed by the families residing nearby.*

# 'Each' and 'Every'

- When 'each' or 'every' functions as the subject of a sentence, a singular verb form is used with it. Singular verb form is also used when any subject is preceded by 'each' or 'every'.
  - *Each of the cats owned by Ms. Willoughby is beautiful.*
- Fill in the blank:
  - *Every man and woman \_\_\_\_\_ entitled to the right to freedom of expression.*  
(is/are)
    - Even though the subject seems plural, it is considered singular because it is preceded by 'every'.
  - *Every man and woman is entitled to the right to freedom of expression.*

# 'Each' and 'Every'

- Remember that when 'each' follows a subject, it does not play a role in determining the verb form.

Therefore, while it is correct to say,

*Each of the brothers is an inhabitant of the villa.*

if 'each' is made to follow the subject, the correct sentence will read:

*The brothers each are inhabitants of the villa.*

- Here, the plural subject “The brothers” requires the plural verb “are”.

# 'Each' and 'Every'

- Similarly, there are other singular subjects that are mistakenly seen as plural.
- Some of them are:
  - Anyone/Everyone/Someone/No one
  - Anybody/Everybody/Somebody/Nobody
  - Anything/Everything/Something/Nothing
  - Whoever/Whatever
  - Either/Neither (if unaccompanied by 'or')
- **Note:** Indefinite pronouns are almost always singular.
- **Tip:** When confused, choose singular; the probability of a confusing pronoun to be singular is higher.

# 'The Number Of' v/s 'A Number Of'

- A singular verb is used with the phrase 'the number of' but a plural verb is used with 'a number of'.
- Fill in the blank with 'has' or 'have':
  - *The number of cottages in this area \_\_\_\_\_ increased greatly in the last two years.*
    - If the phrase “of cottages in this area” is ignored, it is easily seen that the subject “The number” is singular. So, the verb must be singular.
  - *The number of cottages in this area has increased greatly in the last two years.*

# 'The Number Of' v/s 'A Number Of'

- Fill in the blank with 'has' or 'have':

- *A number of cottages in this area \_\_\_\_\_ come up in the last two years.*

- 'A number of' is an idiomatic expression. It is used in the sense 'some' or 'many' is. “cottages”, thus, becomes the subject.

- *A number of cottages in this area have come up in the last two years.*

# Fractions and Percentages

- When fractions or percentages precede a prepositional phrase starting with 'of', the subject is present in the prepositional phrase and a verb form is appropriately chosen.
- Fill in the blank:
  - *Two-thirds of the land \_\_\_\_\_ good enough for agricultural purposes.*  
(is/are)
    - The subject “land” is singular. The fraction “Two-thirds” will not determine the verb form.
  - *Two-thirds of the land is good enough for agricultural purposes.*

# Majority, Minority, Plurality

- Depending on the context, the words 'majority', 'minority', and 'plurality' can be either singular or plural. If individual elements are to be indicated, a plural verb must be used. If the whole is to be indicated, a singular verb must be used.
- Examples:
  - *The majority of the fruit trees in his garden are not bearing fruits properly.*
    - The subject is “majority of trees” which is plural.
  - *The cult has gained significance because the majority is following it.*
    - The subject is “the majority” which is singular.



# Phrases and Clauses that Function as Subjects

- An *-ing* phrase or an entire clause, at times, performs the function of a subject in a sentence. Such a subject is always singular and so takes the singular form of the verb.
- Identify the error:
  - *Climbing mountain peaks is an exhilarating experience.*
  - The sentence is correct. The subject here is the *-ing* phrase “Climbing mountain peaks”, which is singular.

# Phrases and Clauses that Function as Subjects

- Fill in the blank:

- *Whatever judgment they give \_\_\_\_\_ to be accepted without questions.*  
(has/have)

- The clause “Whatever judgment they give” is the subject here, singular.

- *Whatever judgment they give has to be accepted without questions.*

# Turning the Word Order Over

- On the GMAT, the verb is sometimes placed before the subject. To easily identify the subject, turn over this inverted order so that the verb follows the subject.
- Identify the error:

*In the shadows of the huge trees sit the forlorn Orlando, composing songs for Rosalind.*

If the given sentence is thus rearranged, it will read:

*The forlorn Orlando sit in the shadows of the huge trees, composing songs for Rosalind.*

- The subject “the forlorn Orlando” is singular and thus, doesn’t agree with the verb “sit”.

*In the shadows of the huge trees **sits** the forlorn Orlando, composing songs for Rosalind.*

# Turning the Word Order Over

- Identify the error:

*In need of furnishing is the parlor and the dining room.*

If the given sentence is rearranged, it will read:

*The parlor and the dining room are in need of furnishing.*

- There is a compound (thus, plural) subject here – “the parlor and the dining room”.

*In need of furnishing are the parlor and the dining room.*

# 'There is' / 'There are'

- The subject of a 'there is' or 'there are' expression follows the verb. Hence, as often is the case on GMAT, **meaning is important**.
- Identify the error:
  - *There is a sparrow and a crow on the broken trunk of the ancient tree.*
    - Since the subject is “a sparrow and a crow”, we need a plural verb.
  - *There are a sparrow and a crow on the broken trunk of the ancient tree.*

# Inverted Subject-Verb Order in Subordinate Clauses

- Be alert to the inverted subject-verb order in subordinate clauses.

- Fill in the blank:

*“Pride and Prejudice” is a classic for which \_\_\_\_\_ been written many sequels.*  
(has/have)

- Rearranging makes easier-

*“Pride and Prejudice” is a classic for which many sequels have been written.*

Hence, the correct sentence is:

*“Pride and Prejudice” is a classic for which have been written many sequels.*

# One of the...

- Note the following structure:
  - *One of the 'noun' (will always be plural) + that/who + plural verb*
  - *This is one of the eggs that \_\_\_\_\_ cracked. (is/are)*
  - *This is one of the eggs that are cracked.*
- However, keep in mind that only when the plural noun is followed by that/who will the verb be plural. Otherwise the structure will be:
  - *One of the 'noun' (will always be plural) + singular verb (usually 'is')*
  - *One of the eggs \_\_\_\_\_ cracked. (is/are)*
  - *One of the eggs is cracked.*

thank you



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