SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Subject-verb agreement involves using the right verb form for the noun that holds the subject position in your sentence. If the grammatical subject of your sentence is singular, you use a singular verb form; if it is plural, you use the plural verb form. Subjects and verbs are said to disagree when verb endings do not correspond to the subject.

Verb Endings

Personal endings for regular English verbs:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{I walk} & \text{We walk} \\
\text{You walk} & \text{You (plural) walk} \\
\text{She/he/it walks} & \text{They walk}
\end{array}
\]

Note that the only time you need a different ending is with the third person singular form. You also need to consider different forms with some common irregular verbs:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{To be} & \text{To have} \\
\text{I am} & \text{I have} \\
\text{You are} & \text{You have} \\
\text{She/he/it is} & \text{She/he/it has}
\end{array}
\]

These common irregular verbs are especially important because they are also auxiliary verbs:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{She is walking to school.} & \text{They are walking to school.} \\
\text{She has walked to school.} & \text{They have walked to school.}
\end{array}
\]

Common Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

Errors in subject-verb agreement occur much more frequently when sentences become more complicated. Be careful of the following tricky situations:

When there are several words between the subject and verb. The tendency is to make the verb agree with the closest noun, which is not correct.

\[\text{Incorrect} \quad e.g., \text{The reliability of many standard intelligent tests have been challenged in recent years.}\]

The subject of this sentence is reliability so the verb should be has been challenged.
When the subjects are compound, that is, when two singular subjects are joined by *and* (A and B) to form a plural subject.

**Incorrect**
e.g., *The high cost and extreme difficulty* of implementing the project was cited in the explanation of its cancellation.

The subject here is *high cost and difficulty* (two things) so the verb should be *were cited*.

When the subjects are *who, which, or that* (the first words in adjective clauses).

**Incorrect**
e.g., Elena is one of the *many students who has benefitted* from the services of the Writing Centre.

In this sentence, the word *who* is a pronoun that refers to plural *students*, so the verb should be *have benefitted*.

When the subject comes *after* the verb as in inverted sentences.

**Incorrect**
e.g., *Under the table was several empty beer bottles and various dirty socks*.

In this sentence, although the subject *empty beer bottles and various dirty socks* comes after the verb *was*, it is still plural so the verb should be *were*.

When the subject is a collective noun (*team, audience, class, family*, etc.).

Collective nouns are especially tricky because they can be singular or plural, depending on the context. Collective nouns are followed by *singular verbs* when the members of the group are functioning as a *single entity*, and by *plural verbs* when they are functioning as *individuals within the group*.

e.g., *The class is writing the exam*.

In this case, the class is functioning as a unit, so the verb is singular.

e.g., *After the exam, the class go their separate ways*.

In this case, the individuals in the class are doing different things, so the verb is plural.