



THE UNIVERSITY
WRITING CENTER
3211 HHRA BUILDING

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Related Handouts: See **TERMS TO KNOW:** Vital Sentence Elements and Prepositional and Verbal Phrases

THE PRINCIPLE

The principle behind subject-verb agreement is this: the correct form of a verb is determined by the person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) and number (singular or plural) of its subject.

Remember this: when you write in the *present* time, you need to add an -s to the basic verb form if the **subject** of that verb is *he, she, it, or any singular noun or pronoun*. (These are "3rd person singular" subjects.) For any other kind of subject (*I, you, we, they, or any plural noun or pronoun*), the verb should *not* have an extra -s attached to it.

THE PROBLEM

Here is a paragraph that violates the principle of **subject-verb agreement** outlined above. (Words used incorrectly are underlined.)

Cinderella spend most of her time scrubbing floors for her wicked stepmother and ugly stepsisters. When an invitation arrive for a ball at the prince's palace, everybody in the family get excited. The ugly stepsisters immediately goes shopping for new gowns, while Cinderella stay home and scrub. Although she ask nicely for permission to go, the wicked stepmother and sisters is not about to let the pretty Cinderella show them up in public.

THE SOLUTION

Find the subject(s) and verb(s) in your sentences. **If you are writing in the present tense, be sure your singular verbs end in -s, and your plural verbs do not.** Here's our sample paragraph, corrected, with subjects and verbs in bold type:

Cinderella spends most of her time scrubbing floors for her wicked stepmother and ugly stepsisters. When an **invitation arrives** for a ball at the prince's palace, **everybody** in the family **gets** excited. The ugly **stepsisters** immediately **go** shopping for new gowns, while **Cinderella stays** home and **scrubs**. Although **she asks** nicely for permission to go, the wicked **stepmother and sisters are** not about to let the pretty Cinderella show them up in public.

NOW SOME FINE PRINT

- 1) **SUBJECTS MAY BE SEPARATED FROM THEIR VERBS.**
Remember that the **subject** is the noun or pronoun that does the action of the verb or that something happens to. If **prepositional phrases** or other descriptive words come between the subject and its verb, ignore them when deciding whether or not to put an -s on the verb.

Ex: The **girl** in the glass slippers **needs** to leave by midnight.

2) COMPOUND SUBJECTS CAN BE TRICKY.

A) Two or more singular subjects joined by "and" form a plural subject (the equivalent of "they"), so there is no -s on the verb...

Ex: **Cinderella and the prince expect** to live happily ever after.

B) ... *unless* the two singular subjects refer to the same person or thing:

Ex: **The stepmother and chief villain** of the piece **tries** to prevent Cinderella from trying on the shoe.

"Stepmother and chief villain" are one and the same subject: SHE tries

C) If two or more subjects are joined by "or" or "nor," the form of the verb is determined by the subject closest to it.

Ex: Neither the **stepmother nor her daughters fit** into the glass slipper.
Closest subject is plural "daughters," so verb has no -s on the end.

3) MOST INDEFINITE PROUNOUNS (*anybody, anyone, each, everybody, everyone, somebody, someone, nobody, one*) ARE 3rd PERSON SINGULAR WORDS, so their present-tense verbs need to end in -s.

Ex: **Everybody loves** a happy ending.

4) THE VERB TO BE HAS ITS OWN SPECIAL PATTERNS.

It is the only verb that uses different forms in both the present and past tense, and that changes its form in other ways besides simply adding or subtracting an -s.

In the PRESENT tense

In the PAST tense

| <u>subject</u> | <u>verb</u> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| I | am |
| You | are |
| he, she, it, or single noun | is |
| we | are |
| they or plural noun | are |

| <u>subject</u> | <u>verb</u> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| I | was |
| you | were |
| he, she, it, or single noun | was |
| we | were |
| they or plural noun | were |

Ex: **I am** sure that **you are** getting sick of hearing about Cinderella, but her **story was** my favorite when **I was** a little girl and my **sisters were** mean to me.

5) SOME AUXILIARY VERBS (such as *have, do*, and any form of *to be*) MUST CHANGE TO AGREE WITH THEIR SUBJECTS. (Use *has* and *does* for 3rd person singular subjects; *have* and *do* for all other subjects.) BUT "MODAL" AUXILIARIES (*can, could, may, might, will, would, should*) HAVE ONLY ONE FORM, no matter what the subject is.

Ex: Walt Disney did not invent Cinderella. Some **version** of her story **can** be found in many different cultural traditions. Although her **mother has** always died and been replaced by a wicked stepmother, **Cinderella does** not have a fairy godmother in most versions. **She might** be helped by a fish, or by a kindly male magician, or by praying to the bones of her dead mother. And not all the **endings are** equally happy. Some **versions will** place her in a less-than-ideal marriage, and **others can** be quite violent.