Subject-Verb Agreement

In the English language, all verbs in the present tense must agree with the number of subjects in the sentence. This means that plural subjects need plural verbs, and singular subjects require singular verbs.

All sentences are composed of a subject and verb. The subject is the noun that performs the action, and the verb is the action. Not all verbs are action verbs; verbs can also represent a state of being.

*Example:* The cat (subject) runs (‘action’ verb).
Mark (subject) is (‘being’ verb) sad.

Sometimes, prepositional and adjectival phrases can distract you from the real subject of the sentence. Be sure to always choose the noun that fits the verb of the sentence.

*Example:* The bag [of groceries] sits by the door.

“Of groceries” is an adjectival phrase. It’s describing what the bag contains. Although “groceries” is plural, the thing that contains the groceries is one bag; therefore, the bag is the singular subject, and the verb “sits” is in singular form.

Don’t get used to the idea that the subject of the sentence will be the first thing you will see in the sentence. In inverted sentences, the structure is altered and you need to be attentive in order to determine which noun is related to the verb of the sentence.

*Example:* Here are the books you ordered.

If you were to reorder the sentence above and have the subject come first, it would read: “The books you ordered are here.” Both versions of this sentence have two verbs, “ordered” and “are”, so first we must figure out which one is the main verb of the sentence. Ask yourself what is the idea that the sentence is trying to get across to the reader. Is it that you ordered the books or that that books are here? Now that you know the main verb is “are”, you know that the phrase “you ordered” is part of an adjective clause that describes which books. Which books are here? The books that you ordered. Since “books” is our subject and is plural, then the verb that matches it must be in plural form. If it had just been one book, then the sentence would read, “Here is the book you ordered” or “The book you ordered is here”.

When dealing with complex verbs, you must make the auxiliary verb, also known as a helping verb, match the quantity of the subject.

*Example:* This store has been open for many years.

They have been friends since kindergarten.

In the first example, the verb is “has been”, and “has” is the auxiliary that has to match the singular subject. In the second example, the verb “have” is in plural form because “they” implies more than one subject.