

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

On the ACT and SAT language sections you're likely to run into questions about **subject-verb agreement**. You probably learned about this at some point in grade school and/or high school, but it doesn't hurt to get a quick refresher.

The basic idea here is simple: **if the subject is singular, the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.**

A few examples:

The musician plays piano.

The musicians play piano.

In the first sentence, because the subject "musician" is singular, the verb must also be plural: "plays." In the second sentence, because the subject "musicians" is plural, the verb is in the plural form: "play."

Now, this may seem pretty simple. But when dealing with longer, more complex sentences, subject-verb agreement can be a bit tricky. For example, consider the following sentence:

Bowlers who use a custom-made ball scores higher, on average.

Notice anything odd about the sentence? It probably sounds wrong to your ears, in particular the verb "scores." But it's important to understand why. The subject in this sentence is the plural noun "bowlers." And so, the verb must also be plural: "score." Not "scores," which is singular.

What makes this sentence a bit tricky is that the phrase "who use a custom-made ball" comes between the subject and the verb in question. A simple way to work with such sentences when dealing with subject-verb agreement is to cross out the intervening phrase:

Bowlers ~~who use a custom-made ball~~ scores higher, on average.

With the phrase crossed out, you're left with "Bowlers scores higher, on average." And you can more clearly see that "scores" does not agree with "Bowlers."

Here's an even trickier example:

One of the flower pots is broken.

At first glance, it may seem as though the sentence should read, "One of the flower pots are broken." Why? Because "pots" is plural, right? But the actual subject of the sentence is "One," which is singular. Tricky.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

The phrase that comes between the true subject and the verb is preposition phrase: “of the flower pots”. If you cross out that phrase, the sentence looks like this:

One ~~of the flower pots~~ is broken.

Now it looks more obvious. It simply wouldn’t make sense to write “One are broken.” It not only sounds wrong; it is technically and grammatically incorrect because the subject is singular and the verb is plural.

That’s how subject-verb agreement works in the most basic sense. Here are a few more guidelines for specific (and often tricky) cases:

Subjects that may seem plural but are actually singular: each, neither, either, everyone, everybody, someone, anyone, nobody, somebody, anybody.

Either one of them was (not were) at the party.

Nobody wants (not want) to feel bored.

Subjects joined by “and” are plural. Subjects joined by “or” or “nor” require a verb that agrees with the last subject listed.

Jim and I are (not is) going to the movies.

Neither Emily nor Jack is (not are) going to the movies.

Neither Emily nor her sisters are (not is) going to the movies.

Collective nouns can be singular or plural, depending on how you use them in a sentence.

The team is participating in a tournament. (“Team” functions as a single unit and so take a singular verb).

The team were required to provide their statistics for the season. (“Team” in this instance means a group of individuals, and so takes the plural form of the verb.)

Main Takeaway

When dealing with subject-verb agreement-related questions on the SAT, first identify the subject in the sentence. If the subject is singular, the related verb must be singular. If the subject is plural, the related verb must be plural.