

Grammar and Usage

Subject-Verb Agreement

- A verb must agree in number (singular or plural) with the subject of the sentence. Singular subjects take singular verbs; plural subjects take plural verbs.

Singular

The *office is* closed.

Plural

Many *offices are* open past 5 p.m.

- The word before the verb is not always its subject. Look for *who* or *what* is doing the action.
 - Remember that two singular subjects joined by *and* are plural and need a plural verb.

My mother and father celebrate their anniversary in August.

- Sometimes an insertion separates the subject and verb.

*The secretary, not the other employees, answers the phone.
The man who sells homemade burritos has a large mustache.*

- Sometimes a prepositional phrase separates the subject and the verb; read the sentence without the phrase to determine the correct verb.

One of the students was caught cheating on the exam.

- Words with *one* and *body* are singular.

Everyone except the new employees was given a raise.

- *-ing* phrases are usually singular.

Driving at night requires extra caution.

Verb Tenses

- Use present tense verbs to state a fact, describe an ongoing action, or relate an incident in film or literature.

*Dogs make excellent companions for the elderly.
Hamlet stages a play to trap the man who murdered his father.*

- Use simple past tense to narrate an event that happened once.

Johnson hit a three-point shot to win the game.

- Use *was* or *were* for a state of being in the past.
Kelli was sick yesterday.
- For the past continuing up to the present, use *has* or *have* plus the past participle--usually an *-ed* ending.
Matt's grandfather has lived in the same house since college.
- Use *had* plus the past participle, usually an *-ed* ending, when you are writing in the past tense and want to refer to an earlier event.
After a year had passed, Tiffany and Frank divorced.
- To indicate the future tense, look at the following forms:
Nikki will graduate next spring.
Nikki is going to graduate next spring.
Nikki is graduating next spring.
- *Be* verbs: *is, am, are, was, were*
Be verbs are used as helping verbs with *-ing* verbs or with past participles--usually *-ed*.
Marie is traveling to Italy this summer.
The World Trade Center was bombed on September 11, 2002.
- *Have* verbs: *have, has, had*
Have verbs are used as helping verbs with past participles-usually *-ed*.
We have waited long enough!
Ross has always wanted a dog as a pet.
- Other helping verbs:
*She finally **did** finish her paper last night.*
*As a child, I **could** write with either hand.*

Irregular Verbs

The following lists twenty-five irregular verbs. Most dictionaries list the forms of irregular verbs.

Present	Past	Past Participle (after <i>have</i> or <i>be</i> verbs)
am, is, are	was, were	been
bring	brought	brought
come	came	come
cost, costs	cost	cost
do, does	did	done
draw	drew	drawn
drink	drank	drunk
eat	ate	eaten
fall	fell	fallen
fly	flew	flown

freeze	froze	frozen
get	got	gotten
go	went	gone
grow	grew	grown
have, has	had	had
know	knew	known
lay (put)	laid	laid
lie (recline)	lay	lain
rise (get up)	rose	risen
run	ran	run
see	saw	seen
shine (sparkle)	shone	shone
shrink	shrank	shrunk
speak	spoke	spoken
throw	threw	thrown

Pronouns

- Make sure pronouns agree in *number* and *gender*: they are consistent. Avoid shifting from a *person* to *they* and from *I* to *you*.
- Consider the following sentences:

A person should start a savings plan early if they want to retire comfortably.

- In this sentence, *person* is singular, meaning it requires a singular pronoun (*he* or *she*); the pronoun *they* is plural, which again can make the sentence awkward and can lead to errors. Instead, write:

A person should start a savings plan early if he or she (not they) wants to retire comfortably.

- However, *he or she* can be awkward when used repeatedly. So try making the subject plural:

People should start a savings plan early if they want to retire comfortably.

- The same principle applies to indefinite pronouns (pronouns that refer to nonspecific persons or things). Formal English treats pronouns such as *anybody*, *everyone*, *somebody*, and *someone* as singular; therefore, they require a singular pronoun:

In my class, everyone works to the best of his or her (not their) ability.

- Similarly, this principle applies to other generic nouns:

Every musician must practice regularly if he or she (not they) wants to excel

- Again, the *he or she* or *his or her* constructions can be cumbersome. As another option, make the antecedents plural or rewrite the sentence so that no problem of agreement arises.