

## 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 |

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## 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.