



University of Houston Law Center
LEGAL WRITING CENTER

Writing is Thinking

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Writing Tip of the Week
Subject-Verb Agreement—Part 3

Agreement is matching the form of one word to another. Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs.

1. Linking Verbs Agree With Their Subjects, Not Their Subject Complements.

In the following example, the linking verb “was” agrees with “testimony,” not the subject complement “contradictory and misleading.”

The defendant’s testimony was contradictory and misleading.

2. The Verb Agrees With Its Subject Even When the Subject Comes After the Verb.
Subjects follow verbs after expletive constructions such as “there is” and “there are.”

*There is a good chance that the case will end in a mistrial.
There are several options for ensuring that your loan is repaid.*

3. The Title of a Work or a Word Used as a Word Takes a Singular Verb.

*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly is Clint Eastwood’s best film.
“Criteria” is the plural form of “criterion.”*

4. “That,” “Which,” and “Who,” When Used as Subjects of Relative Clauses, Agree in Number with Their Antecedents; Consequently, Their Verbs Must Also Agree in Number with Their Noun Antecedents.

In the following example, “who” refers back to the plural “criminals”; consequently, the verb “are” agrees in number with “criminals.”

The criminals who are in shackles are going to get five to ten.

5. Money, Distance, and Measurement Subjects Usually Take Singular Verbs.

Twenty thousand dollars is a reasonable fee for a case of this complexity.

Adapted from: *The New St. Martin’s Handbook*—Lunsford & Connors
The Legal Writing Handbook—Oates, Enquist, & Kunsch
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