

Sentences Must Agree to Agree

If your sentences don't have proper agreement, you can confuse your reader! Improper agreement will either bury your ideas, or change your meaning. What must agree? Your subject and verb, and your pronouns.

Subject-verb agreement: the verb must agree with its subject in both number and person:

Number:	Singular The <i>dog</i> <i>was</i> tired. The <i>book</i> <i>was</i> on the table.	Plural The <i>dogs</i> <i>were</i> tired. The <i>books</i> <i>were</i> on the table.
Person:	Singular <i>I</i> <i>am</i> at work. <i>She</i> <i>is</i> playing.	Plural <i>We</i> <i>are</i> at work. <i>They</i> <i>are</i> playing.

Some rules about subject-verb agreement:

1. If another part of a sentence comes between the subject and verb, they do not change the number or person of the verb:
The girls who were dancing *are* now eating ice cream. (The girls ... are)
The paper about dogs and cats *was* distributed. (The paper ... was)
2. If you invert the order of the subject and verb, it doesn't affect agreement:
In the car *were* *bags* of clothes.
Bags of clothes *were* in the car.
3. Some nouns are plural in form but singular in meaning and take singular verbs:
The news *was* interesting.
4. Some nouns are plural in form but can either be singular or plural depending on their meaning in the sentence:
Politics *is* a taboo subject at work.
My politics *are* conservative.
5. Two or more subjects that are joined by the conjunction *and* take a plural verb:
The *birds* and the *bees* *have* wings. (A bird *has* wings, a bee *has* wings, but birds and bees together *have* wings)
6. If two subjects form a single idea or are one unit, they take a singular verb:
The *birds* and the *bees* *is* a difficult conversation for some parents.
7. Singular subjects that are joined by the conjunction *or* or *nor* take a singular verb:
Neither the *bride* nor the *groom* *is* here yet.
Either the *red shirt* or the *green shirt* *is* appropriate.

8. If the subjects joined by *or* or *nor* are different in number or person, the verb agrees with the subject closest to the verb:
 Either the *bedrooms* or the *bathroom needs* cleaning.
 Neither the *bathroom* nor the *bedrooms need* cleaning.
9. A collective noun takes a singular verb if the group is a unit, but a plural verb if the emphasis is on the individual members of the group:
 The team *was* running.
 The team *were* dressing.

Pronoun agreement: pronouns used as subjects must agree with their verbs, but pronouns must also agree with their antecedents (noun or noun phrase).

Here are the rules:

1. An indefinite pronoun as a subject must have the correct form of verb:
 Singular indefinite pronouns (*each, either, neither*) and pronouns ending in *-body* or *-one* take singular verbs:
 Everyone *is* accounted for.
 Each child *is* happy.

Plural indefinite pronouns (*both, few, many, several*) take plural verbs:
 Both *are* doing well.
 Several *are* still sleeping.

Some indefinite pronouns (*all, any, most, none, some*) are either singular or plural depending on the sentence. If they refer to one thing or a whole quantity it is singular, if it refers to a number of individual items, it is plural:
 Most of the money *was* stolen.
 Most of the people *were* interviewed.

2. If the subject is a relative pronoun (*who, which, that*), the verb must agree with the pronoun's antecedent:
 He *is* the swimmer *who won* the bronze medal.
 The pigs *that were squealing* have been fed.

3. A pronoun agrees with the antecedent in gender, number, and person:
 The man put on *his* coat.
 The men put on *their* coats.

If the antecedent is indefinite, decide if the antecedent is singular or plural before making the pronoun agree:

Either of the girls can sing *her* song. (They each have a song)
 All of the girls can sing *their* song. (All the girls have one song)

4. If the antecedent is a collective noun, the pronoun is singular or plural, depending on whether the collective noun is singular or plural:

The panel made *its* vote.

The panel chose after discussion among *themselves*.

Sentence agreement keeps your subject and verb, and your pronouns in check. Without such an arrangement, your words can't live in harmony, and you will breach your readers' trust. Keep those agreements!