SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?  There’s at least five common reasons writers mismatch subjects and verbs.

Did you notice the error?  Let’s take a closer look.

The subject of a sentence (the main who or what of the sentence) and its corresponding verb (the word[s] expressing the subject’s action or state or being) must agree in number.  An agreement error occurs when a singular subject is used with a plural verb or a plural subject is used with a singular verb.

The example above includes a subject-verb agreement error because the main part of the subject, “reasons,” is plural, and the verb, “is” (contracted with “There”), is singular.  We can avoid the error by making the verb plural:

There are at least five common reasons writers mismatch subjects and verbs.

WHY IS THIS ERROR SO COMMON?

Many writers can easily make the subject and verb of a sentence agree when the subject is simple and directly precedes the verb.  However, there are many situations that make agreement more difficult.

When a sentence begins with “There is” or “There are,” the true subject follows the verb:

There are many ways to complete general education requirements at UO.
There is plenty of time to choose courses for next term.

In long or complex subjects the main noun may be difficult to identify:

The benefits of earning a Bachelor’s Degree are worth the trials along the way.

In this example, “Degree” is the noun closest to the verb, and because it is singular, a writer may be tempted to use the singular verb “is” after it.  However, “benefits,” a plural word, is the main noun of the subject and requires the verb “are.”  The words “of earning a Bachelor’s Degree” simply expand on the idea of “benefits” and should not be mistaken for the main part of the subject.

Some words that may seem plural, such as everyone, anyone, no one, each, either, and neither, are grammatically singular:

Everyone enjoys having a day off from time to time.
Neither of us wants to spend all weekend cleaning house.

Some pronouns (words that stand in for nouns) like all, any, more, most, none, and some may be either plural or singular, depending on whether they are used in a general, collective way or, instead, with emphasis on the individual.  The same is true of some words that identify groups, measurements, and disciplines:

None of the students carry umbrellas.
None of the tea is decaffeinated.
The faculty is the finest in the Northwest.
The faculty are prepared to vote at the next meeting.

Six hours is too long to wait.
Six hours have passed since we came here.

Statistics is a challenging subject.
These statistics support your theory.

Titles or names that end in “s” may be singular.

A Few Good Men is my sister’s favorite movie.
Academic Learning Services is located in PLC.

When a subject includes two nouns joined with “and,” it is usually plural. However, when the nouns are considered a single unit, they form a singular subject:

Peaches and cream is a delicious dessert.

When two nouns are joined by “or” or “nor,” the noun closest to the verb determines whether the verb should be singular or plural:

Neither Judy nor my sisters enjoy opera.
Neither my sisters nor Judy enjoys opera.

HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS?

First, locate the verb in the sentence. Is the corresponding subject singular or plural? If the subject is singular, the verb should (usually) end in “s.” If the subject is plural, the verb should (usually) not end in “s.”

If the subject is complex, the first noun of the subject usually determines whether the verb should be singular or plural. To check the agreement, eliminate prepositional phrases and modifiers in the sentence and test the subject and verb when they are immediately next to each other.

One of the teachers I met during my high school years has published a book.

Check sentences beginning with “There is” and “There are.” The first noun after the phrase is probably the subject. Does it agree with the verb? If you’re not sure, rearrange the word order of the sentence to check for proper subject-verb agreement.

There are twenty people on the party list so far.
Twenty people are on the party list so far.

TRY IT!

Are you ready to try out these techniques? Identify and revise the subject-verb agreement errors in this passage:

Uncle Stanley and his girlfriend, Kira, is coming to visit me next weekend. Unfortunately, neither of them are very interesting. Every time they visit, Kira sleeps about eighteen hours a day, and Stanley tells childhood stories over and over. There is only about three stories in his entire repertoire, and, although he finds them amusing, neither his stories nor his one and only joke are funny at all. I try to get him to discuss other topics, but economics are his only real interest, and I don’t find that topic very interesting either. I hate to admit it, but I hope the days they spend with me passes quickly.