

1. VERBS

Two types of verb questions appear on the SAT:

- 1) Subject-Verb Agreement
- 2) Verb Tense and Form

Subject-Verb Agreement

All verbs must agree with their subject in number:

- Singular subjects take singular verbs.
- Plural subjects take plural verbs.

Virtually all SAT questions that deal with number ask about verbs in the 3rd person singular (*he/she/it/one*) and 3rd person plural (*they*) forms.

3rd person singular verbs always end with an –s; 3rd person plural verbs do not. Note that this is the opposite of nouns, which take an –s in the plural rather than the singular.

	<u>Correct</u>	<u>Incorrect</u>
Singular Subject:	The politician speaks.	The politician speak.
Plural Subject:	The politicians speak.	The politicians speaks.
	The politician and her aide are holding a press conference.	The politician and her aide is holding a press conference.

Unfortunately, most subject-verb agreement questions that appear on the SAT are not nearly this straightforward. Subjects rarely appear next to their verbs, making it difficult to spot disagreements.

The ways in which the SAT separates subjects from their verbs are, however, highly predictable. It is important that you practice recognizing the following structures because they will appear over and over again.

Important: *is/are, was/were, and has/have* are the most frequently tested verbs; when you see one of them underlined, you should begin by checking its subject.

Also: In the vast majority of questions in which subject-verb disagreements occur, the verb rather than the subject will be underlined. On exceedingly rare occasions, though, the subject may be underlined. It is therefore technically possible for a sentence to contain a subject-verb agreement error even if no verb is underlined. You will not, however, find both the subject and the verb underlined.

A. Subject – Non-Essential Clause – Verb

Identifying Non-Essential Clauses

A **non-essential clause** describes a noun, often (but not always) the noun that is the subject of a sentence. It is known as a non-essential clause because the description or information it provides is not essential to the meaning of the sentence – it's more like an interruption, which means it can be removed without causing any major grammatical problem or change in meaning. Non-essential clauses have two main identifying features:

- 1) They are surrounded by commas.
- 2) If they are removed from a sentence, the sentence will still make perfect grammatical sense.

In addition:

-They often begin with a “w-word” (or **relative pronoun**), such as *which*, *who*, *whose*, and *where*, that refers to the noun immediately preceding it.

-They are usually followed by verbs.

Let us examine the following sentence:

Moroccan green tea, **which is prepared with a healthy dose of sugar and mint leaves**, is one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

When we examine the sentence's structure, we see it contains a **relative clause** that begins with *which* and that is surrounded by commas. If we remove that clause, we are left with:

Moroccan green tea [...] is one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

The sentence that remains makes complete sense on its own.

Appositives

It is not absolutely necessary to begin a non-essential clause with a “w-word,” however. A non-essential clause that does not begin with one of those words is known as an **appositive**. You do not have to remember the term, but you do have to be able to recognize that the structure is correct, even though it may sound odd to you. For example:

Correct: Moroccan green tea, **a drink prepared with a healthy amount of sugar and mint leaves**, is one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Non-Essential Clauses on the SAT

On the SAT, non-essential clauses are typically inserted between subjects and verbs in order to distract the test-taker from the fact that the subject is singular and the verb is plural or vice-versa.

Incorrect: Moroccan green tea, which is prepared with a healthy amount of sugar and mint leaves, **are** one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Correct: Moroccan green tea, which is prepared with a healthy amount of sugar and mint leaves, **is** one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Whenever you encounter a non-essential clause, you should immediately cross it out. Most often it is used to distract you from spotting subject-verb agreement errors, but it can be used to distract from other types of errors as well (described later). Do not forget to do this! Otherwise, you risk overlooking errors that can be easily spotted.

Sometimes, however, the error will appear *within* the non-essential clause, so if you've crossed one out and can't find another problem in the sentence, go back and check. For example:

Incorrect: Moroccan green tea, which **are** prepared with a healthy amount of sugar and mint leaves, is one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Correct: Moroccan green tea, which **is** prepared with a healthy amount of sugar and mint leaves, is one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Occasionally, you will encounter a non-essential clause followed by the word *and*. This construction is always wrong because if you cross out the non-essential clause, you are left with nonsense:

Incorrect: Moroccan green tea, which is prepared with a healthy amount of sugar and mint leaves, **and it is** one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Incorrect: Moroccan green tea **and it is** one of the most popular drinks across North Africa.

Essential Clauses with "That"

Occasionally, you will see subject-verb agreement questions based on **essential clauses** beginning with *that*. Such clauses are not set off by commas, but the verbs they contain must still agree with their subjects.

Incorrect: Green tea is a beverage that **have** long been used as a form of medicine in many countries.

Correct: Green tea is a beverage that **has** long been used as a form of medicine in many countries.

B. Subject – Prepositional Phrase – Verb

A prepositional phrase is, quite simply, a phrase that begins with a preposition (e.g. *in the box*, *under the table*, *over the bill*). These are often inserted between subjects and verbs to distract from disagreements.

In the sentences below, the subject is underlined, the prepositional phrase is italicized, and the verb is in bold.

Incorrect: Changes *in the balance of trade* **seems** remote from everyday concerns, but they can drastically affect how we spend our money.

Correct: Changes *in the balance of trade* **seem** remote from everyday concerns, but they can drastically affect how we spend our money.

The above sentence contains a classic trick: the subject (*changes*) is plural and thus requires a plural verb (*seem*). However, the prepositional phrase inserted between the subject and the verb has as its last word a singular noun (*trade*), which, if you are not paying close attention, can easily appear to be the subject of the verb that follows. If you don't see an error the first time you read a sentence, cross out all prepositional phrases and check for subject-verb agreement.

The last word of a prepositional phrase will always be the last word right before the verb, so be careful not to cross out verbs when getting rid of prepositional phrases.

Hint: If you see an underlined verb close to the beginning of a sentence, the subject will usually be the first word or couple of words of the sentence.

C. Prepositional Phrase – Verb – Subject

In this structure, the normal word order (or **syntax**) of a sentence is reversed so that the prepositional phrase appears at the beginning of a sentence, followed by the verb and then subject, always in that order.

In the sentences below, the subject is underlined, the prepositional phrase is italicized, and the verb is in bold.

Incorrect: *Along the Loup Canal in Nebraska* **extends** parcs, lakes, and trails owned and operated by the Loup power district.

Correct: *Along the Loup Canal in Nebraska* **extend** parcs, lakes, and trails owned and operated by the Loup power district.

Prepositional Phrase–Verb–Subject errors almost always appear as questions #27-29 and are signaled by a preposition at the beginning of the sentence. Most often, the preposition will be the first word of the sentence, but sometimes it will be the second.

Incorrect: Running *along the Loup Canal in Nebraska* **is** parcs, lakes, and trails owned and operated by the Loup power district.

Correct: Running *along the Loup Canal in Nebraska* **are** parcs, lakes, and trails owned and operated by the Loup power district.

It is common for test-takers to become confused because the reversed syntax makes the sentence sound odd. It is important to understand, however, that the unusual syntax is not what makes the sentence incorrect. It is simply a distraction to keep you from hearing the disagreement between the subject and the verb.

Sometimes a sentence in this form will not contain an agreement error; in those cases, the answer is very likely to be “No error.”

Important: the SAT will often incorrectly pair two singular nouns connected by *and* (a structure known as a **compound subject**) with a singular verb, especially in Prepositional Phrase–Verb–Subject sentences, so always make sure you determine the *entire* subject before deciding whether the verb is right or wrong.

Usual Syntax: A park and a lake **runs** *along the Loup Canal*, a hydroelectric and irrigation canal located in eastern Nebraska.

Unusual Syntax: *Along the Loup Canal* **runs** a park and a lake, both of which are owned and operated by the Loup Power District.

Note that in the second version, the error is much more difficult to hear.

It is also important that you determine the entire subject because errors will very occasionally appear in which the verb comes before the subject but is not preceded by a prepositional phrase:

Incorrect: Radioactivity is generally not considered harmful when people are exposed to it at low levels for brief periods, but less clear **is** its long-term effects.

Correct: Radioactivity is generally not considered harmful when people are exposed to it at low levels for brief periods, but less clear **are** its long-term effects.

D. There is/There are, etc.

There is
There was
There has been } go with **singular** nouns

There are
There were
There have been } go with **plural** nouns

Incorrect: In recent months, there **has been** many questions raised about the handling of the company's finances.

Correct: In recent months, there **have been** many questions raised about the handling of the company's finances.

E. Neither...Nor + Verb

When *neither* and *nor* are used with two singular nouns, the verb should be singular.

Neither (Singular Noun) + Nor (Singular Noun) = Singular Verb

Incorrect: Neither the senator nor her aide **are** expected to appear at the press conference today.

Correct: Neither the senator nor her aide **is** expected to appear at the press conference today.

Although rule is the same for *either...or*, that word pair is not generally tested in regard to subject-verb agreement.

In general, the SAT only incorrectly pairs singular nouns connected by *neither...nor* with plural verbs. It is **highly unlikely** that an error involving plural nouns, or combined singular and plural nouns, would appear.

The rule, however, is that the verb must take the number of the noun that follows *nor* (e.g. "Neither the senator nor her aide **is** expected to speak to the press today," BUT: "Neither the senator nor her aides **are** expected to speak to the press today").

When (*n*)*either* is not paired with (*n*)*or* and is used with two singular nouns, a singular verb should also be used:

Incorrect: Both the senator and her aide appeared at the press conference, but neither **were** willing to speak to reporters.

Correct: Both the senator and her aide appeared at the press the conference, but neither **was** willing to speak to reporters.

Very Important:

Collective Nouns = Singular

Collective Nouns are **singular nouns** that refer to groups of people. Common examples include *agency, institution, school, committee, jury, city, country, company, university, and team*. While many people consider it perfectly acceptable to use such nouns with plural verbs, the SAT only considers **singular** verbs to be correct.

Incorrect: After many days of deliberation, the jury **have** finally returned with a verdict.

Correct: After many days of deliberation, the jury **has** finally returned with a verdict.

Watch out for collective nouns. They appear often, and their presence in a sentence often indicates an agreement error.

A number of = Plural

The number = Singular

Correct: A number of workers **are** beginning to protest the economic policies instituted by the new administration.

BUT

Correct: The number of workers beginning to protest the new administration's economic policies **is** unexpectedly high.

Each = Singular

Incorrect: Each of the labor union's members **are** expected to attend the meeting at which next year's contract will be negotiated with company officials.

Correct: Each of the members of the labor union **is** expected to attend the meeting at which next year's contract will be negotiated with company officials.

(Every) One = Singular

Incorrect: (Every) one of the labor union's members **are** expected to attend the meeting, at which next year's contract will be negotiated with company officials.

Correct: (Every) one of the labor union's members **is** expected to attend the meeting, at which next year's contract will be negotiated with company officials.

Gerunds when used as subjects = Singular

Incorrect: Playing parlor games such as charades **were** a popular pastime in the early twentieth century, before the invention of radio and television.

Correct: Playing parlor games such as charades **was** a popular pastime in the early twentieth century, before the invention of radio and television.

Subject-Verb Agreement Exercises

In the following sentences, fix any subject-verb agreement error that appears. Label all subjects, verbs, and prepositional phrases, and make sure to cross out any non-essential clauses. Some of the sentences may not contain an error. (Answers p. 157, Official Guide question list p. 139)

1. The process of living vicariously through a fictional character in order to purge one's emotions are known as catharsis.
2. Along the border between China and Tibet lies the Himalaya Mountains, which include some of the highest peaks in the world.
3. Recognized for formulating unorthodox social theories, Lev Gumilev and D.S. Mirsky was partly responsible for founding the neo-urasianist political and cultural movement.
4. The works of artist Alan Chin draws inspiration from both the California gold rush and the construction of the transcontinental railroad.
5. The maps of historian and cartographer John Speed depict some of the first visual representations of many towns and cities throughout England, Ireland, and Scotland.
6. Playboating, a discipline of whitewater rafting or canoeing in which players stay in one spot while performing certain maneuvers, involve specialized canoes designed for the sport.
7. Often found in plastic drinking bottles is substantial amounts of a potentially toxic chemical called Bisphenol A.
8. The African violet, which is known for its striking pink and purple leaves, belong to the Saintpaulia family of flowering plants rather than to the violet family.
9. Among the finds from a recent archaeological dig in London was earthenware knobs originally used for "pay walls," boxes into which Elizabethan theater-goers deposited their admission fees.
10. One of the animal kingdom's best jumpers is the flea, whose ability to leap up to 200 times its own body length is nearly unsurpassed.
11. Stiles, structures that provides people with a passage through or over a fence, are often built in rural areas or along footpaths.
12. The patent for the first mechanical pencils were granted to Sampson Morgan and John Hawkins in England during the early nineteenth century.
13. Each of the Taino's five chiefdoms, which inhabited the Bahamas before the arrival of Europeans, were ruled by a leader known as a cacique.
14. If there is sufficient funds remaining, the teacher's request for new classroom supplies will most likely be approved by the school board.
15. Possible explanations for the suspicion surrounding Shakespeare's *Macbeth* includes the superstition that the witches' song is an actual incantation and the belief that theaters only mount the play when they are in need of money.
16. In the galleries of the Louvre museum hang Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, two of the best-known paintings in the world.