



Subject/predicate set: The subject/predicate set is the combination of simple subject and simple predicate that is always present as a nucleus in every sentence. A sentence may contain more than the subject/predicate set—there may be adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and so forth—but it certainly will contain that much. A sentence may even contain numerous subject/predicate sets; in Charles Dickens's famous first sentence in his novel of the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*, there are sixteen clauses, each with its own subject/predicate set:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

We are going to study clauses later—that is the fourth level of analysis—but for the moment we can get a glimpse of what is coming. Dickens's long sentence connects sixteen clauses (a clause is a group of words that has a subject/predicate set in it) into one long, complicated sentence. The first ten clauses use *it was* as the nucleus, the next four clauses use *we had* or *we were*, and the last two clauses are unique. By using this parallel verb structure, Dickens builds up rhythms and then breaks them, leading readers from a first thought to a second thought to a revelation.





Agreement in number.

Ideas have number, and the number of the predicate must agree with the number of the subject.

If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular.

Subject/verb agreement: The formal logic of every idea begins with subject/verb agreement. Every sentence is either about something or about some things. Do you remember that nouns and pronouns have number—that they can be either **singular** or **plural**? Well, verbs also have number and also are either singular or plural. In a sentence a singular subject must be predicated by a singular verb, and a plural subject must be accompanied by a plural verb, or else there is a contradiction. Both verb and subject indicate number; they express that the sentence is either a thought about something singular or a thought about something plural. It cannot be both.

A group of fifty musicians is here.

A group is here; the verb agrees with the subject—and only the subject. You never want the subject and the verb to disagree about whether the subject is singular or plural, even if other distracting and confusing words or phrases come between the subject and its verb. In the following correct sentence, notice how the singular subject and its singular verb agree, ignoring the intervening prepositional phrase: *The **top** of the mountains **is** shrouded in clouds.*

The worst error: There are many kinds of grammar errors, but subject/verb disagreement is the worst. It substantially damages the meaning of the sentence, often making the sentence incomprehensible.

