

Chapter 3: Noun Forms and Subject–Verb Agreement “The Rhetoric of the Op-Ed Page”

Chapter Focus: Forming Nouns and Making them Agree with Verbs

Nouns refer to people, animals, places, or abstract ideas. They are the subjects and objects of verbs, and together with verbs they make up sentences. They are also the objects of prepositions and can be modified by adjectives and used with determiners. Without nouns, we could not express our ideas. The more precise we are in choosing the nouns we use, the clearer and more effective our writing will be.

When nouns or pronouns are used as subjects of sentences, they must **agree** with the main verb of the sentence. In other words, if the subject is singular, the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural the verb must be plural. This can be tricky if the subject is separate from the verb, or if it is not obvious whether the subject is singular or plural. This chapter based on “The Rhetoric of the Op-Ed Page” will help clarify how singular and plural nouns are formed and how to make sure subjects and verbs agree.

Activity 1: Guided composition activity Based on John Edlund, “Three Ways to Persuade”

Teaching Focus: The purpose of this Guided Composition activity is to elicit a paragraph of student writing on the topic of “Three Ways to Persuade.” Using these paragraphs, teachers can informally diagnose students’ strengths and weaknesses in the area of noun formation and subject-verb agreement. At the end of the unit, students will edit their paragraphs, applying what they have learned during the “Noun Forms and Subject-Verb Agreement” unit. They will then compare their paragraphs with the original, paying particular attention to nouns and subject-verb agreement.

Directions to the teacher:

- (1) Ask students to take out a blank sheet of paper.*
- (2) Instruct students to listen as you read the following paragraph at a normal rate of speed. Then ask students to take notes while you read the paragraph again; emphasize that the notes will be essential when they go to write their paragraph. Alternately, write a series of key words or phrases on the board to guide students.*
- (3) Ask them to reconstruct what they heard using their notes or the key words. Students should compare what they have written with each other and make changes as necessary.*
- (4) Collect the paragraphs at the end of the activity and save them. You will return them to your students to edit at the end of the chapter.*

Over 2,000 years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that there were three basic ways to persuade an audience. One way to convince an audience is through the character or image that the writer projects. Another way is through the use of logical arguments. Writers can also appeal to our emotions. Advertisers and politicians still use these

appeals today. A politician often questions the character and values of an opponent.

Advertisers frequently appeal to our desire to be attractive to the opposite sex. Recognizing these appeals helps us decide if we agree with an argument.

3.1 NOUNS

Singular / Plural Forms of Nouns

Nouns can be written to show whether they refer to a single thing and are **singular** or whether they refer to more than one thing and are **plural**. Most plural nouns end with –s, but some nouns are irregular—their plurals are formed in different ways:

ax	axes
church	churches
child	children

Proper nouns are the names of particular person, place, or thing. Proper nouns are capitalized.

Jeremy Rifkin	Koko	Burger King
Washington National Zoo	Pennsylvania	U.S.

In conversation we can usually tell from context if a noun is singular or plural, so having the correct ending is often not essential. In writing, however, correctly forming nouns to indicate singular or plural is very important. You should make sure that the words you use “agree” in number with the verb and with other elements of the sentence that they are used with.

Some common SINGULAR words and phrases

Noun phrases

everyone
everybody
no one
anyone
someone
one of the people
attacking
each student
rhetoric
The United States
a group of students

Possessives

his
her
its

Reflexive pronouns

himself
(never “hissself”)
herself

Some common SINGULAR words and phrases (continued)

Verbs

is

was

has

*runs, writes, uses (-s ending on verbs for singular subjects!)

Some common PLURAL words and phrases

Noun phrases

people

women

some of the scientists

most of the people

a lot of students

speaking and writing

Possessive adjectives

their

Reflexive pronouns

themselves

(never “theirselves” or
“theiself,” or “themself”)

Exercise 2: Identifying singular and plural nouns Based on John Edlund, “Three Ways to Persuade”

Directions: Underline the nouns in the following sentences from the Guided Composition. Label the nouns “sing.” for singular or “pl” for plural.

1. Over 2,000 ^{pl}years ago, the Greek ^{pl}philosopher ^{sing} Aristotle ^{sing} argued that there were three ^{pl}basic ways to persuade an audience.
2. One way to convince an audience is through the character or image that the writer projects.
3. Another way is through the use of logical arguments.
4. Writers can also appeal to our emotions.
5. Advertisers and politicians still use these appeals today.
6. A politician often questions the character and values of an opponent.
7. Advertisers frequently appeal to our desire to be attractive to the opposite sex.
8. Recognizing these appeals helps us decide if we agree with an argument.

Count nouns and non-count nouns

Another category of nouns only occur in the singular. These are called non-count nouns because they cannot be counted. They include mass nouns that can't be separated into parts and abstract nouns that refer to ideas.

sugar	sugars
milk	milks
dirt	dirts
freedom	freedoms
discrimination	discriminations
knowledge	knowledges

Abstract non-count nouns are very important in expository writing since abstract ideas are at the heart of constructing arguments. All the words in bold below are non-count nouns.

*The way animals are raised for **food** can cause **controversy**.
The **health** and **well-being** of animals depend on their emotional state.
Politics is another arena where **ethos** is an important factor.
Logic and **rationality** are highly valued in our society.*

Some nouns can be both count and non-count nouns depending on their meaning.

*Artistotle argues that we will believe someone with good moral **character**.
(Character is non-count when it means someone's moral qualities.)*

*The **characters** in the new James Bond movie are more complex than in the earlier movies.
(Character is a count-noun when it refers to a role in a play or movie.)*

Exercise 3: Identifying count and non-count nouns Based on John Edlund, "Three Ways to Persuade"

Directions: Go to the section of "Three Ways to Persuade" called "Pathos: The Emotions of the Audience. Find five examples of count nouns and five non-count nouns. Put a question mark by any that you are not sure about. Now compare your list with a partner.

COUNT NOUNS	NON-COUNT NOUNS
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Nouns and Determiners

Determiners are used with nouns to limit the meaning in some way:

Articles: A quieter story has been unfolding behind the scenes around the world.

Demonstratives: These researchers are finding that animals are a lot like us.

Possessives: In studying pigs, scientists have found that their behavior is a lot like our behavior.

Quantifiers: Some philosophers have argued that animals are non self-aware.

Numerals: Two New Caledonian crows were able to use tools and even create them.

“Number of” is used with **count nouns**: *A large number of pigs were studied.*

“Amount of” is used with **non-count nouns**: *A large amount of time was used to study them.*

“Fewer” is used with **count nouns**: *Fewer pigs will suffer if they have human contact.*

“Less” is used with **non-count nouns**: *Less human contact means more depressed pigs.*

“Little” is used before **non-count nouns**: *People used to have **little** sympathy for animals.*

“Few” is used before **count nouns**: ***Few** scientists studied animal feelings.*

Exercise 4: Words that go with singular and plural nouns:

Based on Jeremy Rifkin, “A Change of Heart about Animals”

Directions: Circle the correct word (or words) by deciding if it/they should have a plural or a singular form.

1. No one should assume **their / his or her** position on the treatment of animals is shared by others.
2. One fast food company has funded **their / its** own research about animals' emotions.
3. Farmers must spend 20 seconds with each of **their / his or her** pigs each day.
4. A large **amount/number** of advertisements try to make us feel insecure about our appearance.
5. Some people haven't considered **their / his or her** responsibility to animals.
6. We sometimes wish politicians would use **less / fewer** rhetoric and took more action to solve problems.
7. Scientists used to believe that only people felt grief when **their / his or her** loved ones died.

3.2 Subject and Verb Agreement

The basic rule of subject-verb agreement is that if the subject is singular, the verb should be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb should also be plural. Although it is usually natural to make subjects and verbs agree, if the subject is separated from the verb by other words or if there is more than one subject, it is more difficult.

Verb forms that need to agree:

present tense: Scientists study whether animals feel emotions.

present perfect tense: Some people have argued that animals have rights.

helping verbs: Does an elephant feel grief for a dead mate?

main verb “be”: Daily play is essential for happy pigs.

Pay particular attention when you have the following situations:

If two or more subjects are joined by the conjunctions *and*, *or*, or *nor*, the conjunction determines if you use a singular or a plural verb.

- When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more nouns or pronouns connected by ***and***, use a **plural verb**.

Correct: *Anger and pity are* powerful emotions.

Incorrect: *Anger and pity is* powerful emotions.

- When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more singular nouns or pronouns connected by ***or*** or ***nor***, use a **singular verb**.

Correct: *Either anger or pity is* an emotion that can cause us to take action.

Incorrect: *Either anger or pity are* an emotion that can cause us to take action.

- When the subject of a sentence is composed of a singular and a plural noun connected by ***or*** or ***nor***, the noun closest to the verb determines whether it is singular or plural.

Correct: *In the commercial, neither the doctor nor the advertisers are being completely honest.*

Incorrect: *In the commercial, neither the doctor nor the advertisers is being completely honest.*

If the subject and the verb are separated by a phrase or clause, make sure that the verb still agrees with the true subject of the sentence—not with a noun or pronoun in the phrase.

Examples:

- one of the philosophers is (“philosophers” is not the subject)
- the people who understand rhetoric are (“rhetoric” is not the subject)
- the farmer, as well as his neighbors, is (“neighbors” is not the subject)
- the farmer with all the pigs is playing (“pigs” is not the subject)

Some words, that might sound *plural*, are actually singular and take a singular verb. These words are: **each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone**, and **no one**

Examples:

- each of these animals is
- either of the philosophers is
- everyone is
 (“Everyone” seems plural, but the verb agrees with “one,” which is singular.)

In sentences beginning with “there is” or “there are,” be aware that “there” is not the true subject. Therefore, the verb has to agree with the noun that follows the verb.

Examples:

- There are many arguments
- There is an argument

Exercise 5: Correcting subject-verb agreement errors Based on John Edlund, “Three Ways to Persuade”

Directions: Double underline the verb and underline the subject in these sentences. Write “sing” for singular or “pl” for plural over the subject. Then correct the subject-verb agreement problems. Note: All verbs should be in the present tense. When you are finished, compare your answers with a partner. If you are not sure, ask your teacher for help.

1. For Aristotle, a speaker’s ^{sing} character contribute to whether the audience will believe the speaker’s argument.
2. There is several other reasons why an audience might believe an argument.
3. Advertising, both for products and in politics, depend on *ethos* of the person in the advertisement.
4. One of the advertisements use a slender movie star to sell a new diet drug.
5. Each of the advertisements that rely on celebrities are really a deceptive illusion.
6. Writers, consciously creating their images through word choice and style, has occurred for years.

7. Everyone, including student writers, want to communicate an image of authority.
8. Using difficult and unusual words seem like a good way to sound like expert, but this strategy can backfire.
9. Sometimes a writer or a speaker attack the character of the opponent, a tactic called an *ad hominem* argument.

Exercise 6: Making verbs agree with subjects in text
Based on Jeremy Rifkin, “A Change of Heart about Animals”

Directions: Underline the subject of the sentence. Then circle the verb in bold that agrees with the subject. When you have finished, compare your version to the original.

Tool-making and the development of sophisticated language skills **is/are** just two of the many attributes we thought **was/were** exclusive to our species. Self-awareness **is/are** another.

Some philosophers and animal behaviorists **has/have** long **argued** that other animals **is/are** not capable of self-awareness because they **lacks/lack** a sense of individualism. Not so, according to new studies. At the Washington National Zoo, orangutans given mirrors **explores/explore** parts of their bodies they can't otherwise see, showing a sense of self. An orangutan named Chantek who **lives/live** at the Atlanta Zoo used a mirror to groom his teeth and adjust his sunglasses.

Of course, when it **comes/come** to the ultimate test of what **distinguishes/distinguish** humans from the other creatures, scientists **has/have** long believed that mourning for the dead **represents/represent** the real divide. It's commonly believed that other animals **has/have** no sense of their mortality and **is/are** unable to comprehend the concept of their own death. Not necessarily so. Animals, it appears, **experiences/experience** grief. Elephants will often stand next to their dead kin for days, occasionally touching their bodies with their trunks.

Exercise 7: Making verbs agree with subjects in authentic text
Based on “A Change of Heart about Animals: Letters to the Editor”

Directions: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb in parentheses. When you have finished, compare your version to the original.

Re “A Change of Heart About Animals,” Commentary, Sept. 1: Jeremy Rifkin
_____ (argue) that science _____ (have) shown that the differences between
animals and humans _____ (be) less than we _____ (think) and that we should
extend more “empathy” to animals. I disagree. In nature, animals naturally _____ (kill)
each other. If the hawk _____ (do) not care about the feelings of the rabbit that it
_____ (eat), why should humans be any different? _____ (be) Rifkin saying that
nature _____ (be) wrong?

Rifkin _____ (go) so far as to say that pigs _____ (need) social contact and
should be provided with toys. There _____ (be) many real human children in the world
who _____ (do) not have these things. _____ (be) animals more important than
human children? Should our society spend scarce resources on toys for pigs?

Anyone who _____ (have) owned a pet _____ (know) that animals can feel
pain, happiness, anger, and other simple emotions. Most people _____ (have) heard a
parrot or a mynah bird _____ (talk), but this _____ (be) just imitation and mimicry.
We _____ (do) not need science to tell us that animals can do these things. However,
_____ (do) a parrot understand what it _____ (be) saying? Can an animal write a
poem, or even a grocery list?

Rifkin _____ (be) simply an animal rights activist hiding behind a handful of
scientific studies. He _____ (want) to ignore human suffering and focus on animal
discomfort. He _____ (want) animals to have more rights than humans. Let’s not be
fooled.

3.3 Student Writing

Exercise 8: Editing your guided composition

Directions to the teacher:

- (1) Use an overhead projector or a computer to project the Guided Composition paragraph and ask students to read along as you read it out loud.*
- (2) Then project a student paragraph and discuss with the class the differences between the original and the student paragraph (both paragraphs need to be projected simultaneously).*
- (3) Return the student paragraphs and ask them to edit based on what they've learned by doing the activities in the chapter. Don't give them access to the original while they are doing this. Direct them to make sure they have formed nouns correctly and that their subjects and verbs agree.*
- (4) Ask students to compare their edited version with the original.*
- (5) Debrief by asking students what they learned through the comparison and what they can apply to their own writing.*

Exercise 9: Editing your own writing

Directions: Pick a paragraph from your letter to the editor. Make sure the nouns are formed correctly and that subjects and verbs agree. Put a question mark (?) in the margin next to any subjects or verbs that you are unsure about.

- Exchange your paragraph with a partner and discuss any questions you have about your partner's marking. Check with your teacher if you can't agree on an answer.*

Now edit your whole letter for subject-verb agreement