

Subject-Verb Agreement

Ensure that subjects and verbs have the correctly matching forms in even the most complicated sentences.

Overview

Introduction to subject-verb agreement

Estimated time: 4 minutes

On the SAT, it's common to encounter questions like the following:

EXAMPLE

A research paper by a group of American particle physicists, led by Janette Turnbull and Francis Vernon of the University of Florida at Gainesville, introduce several new theories about crystalline structures.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) introduces
- C) are introducing
- D) have introduced

Questions like this are about subject-verb **agreement**.

Subject-verb agreement asks you to figure out which of the answer choices agrees in **number** (singular or plural) with the subject of the sentence. On average, there are about two subject-verb agreement questions on each SAT.

If you are a native English speaker, you may be able to “sound out” the answer, particularly if a subject is located right next to the verb. You know intuitively that sentences like “Jessica go to school” or “I loves cheese pizza” contain grammatical errors. In both cases, the subjects (*Jessica* and *I*, respectively) don't agree with the verbs (*go* and *loves*).

On the SAT, however, you can't always rely upon your instinct for what “sounds right” on subject-verb agreement questions. That's because these questions are designed to distract and confuse you by including a lot of words (especially nouns and pronouns) between the subject and the verb.

In the example above, for instance, what is the subject? Gainesville? the University of Florida? Janette Turnbull and

Francis Vernon? American particle physicists? A group? If you just look a little to the left of the verb, you can easily be misled.

Let's see what happens to the example question after we get rid of these distractions. We do this by simply deleting the parts that get in the way:

A research paper ~~by a group of American particle physicists, led by Janette Turnbull and Francis Vernon of the University of Florida at Gainesville,~~ introduce several new theories about crystalline structures.

That leaves you with just the following:

A research paper introduce several new theories about crystalline structures.

When you focus on the core of the sentence, the question is a lot easier to solve, right?

That's because the distractions—words that made it harder to figure out the sentence's simple subject—are now eliminated. Now the simple subject ("paper") is right next to the verb, and only Choice B agrees with that simple subject.

This module is designed to help you do the same thing—get rid of the interrupting and distracting words and phrases so that you can identify the simple subject.

By the time you're done with this module, you should be able to

- Identify the simple subject of a verb
- Eliminate distractions designed to trick you
- Make sure that an underlined verb agrees with its subject

This module assumes you know some basic concepts about the major parts of a sentence, as well as some important parts of speech.

If you need a review of what a subject is and how to identify one in a sentence, see the [About Clauses](#) module.

If you need a review of prepositions and preposition phrases, see the [About Prepositions](#) module.

If you need a review of verbs, see the [About Verbs](#) module.

This module also builds on ideas covered in the [Punctuating Interruptions](#) module, which you should complete before you begin this module.

Identifying the Subject

How to find the right subject for each verb

Consider the following sentences:

The baseball team from Wilson University defeated the local minor league franchise.

The local minor league franchise defeated the baseball team from Wilson University.

These sentences have exactly the same words in them, but they mean two very different things. That's because the two main noun phrases in each sentence occupy different "slots" in the sentence. That is, they have different grammatical functions. In each case, a different phrase serves as the subject.

In the first, the subject is "the baseball team from Wilson University". In the second, "the local minor league franchise" is.

DICTIONARY

subject

A subject is one of two required parts of a **clause**. (The other is the **predicate**.) In the most common case, the subject is a noun **phrase** indicating either who or what performs an action, or what the clause is about.

In ordinary sentences, the subject comes before the verb, and when the sentence is simple enough, there's a good chance that you'll be able to tell what the subject is intuitively.

With more complicated sentences, though, your intuition may not be as strong. It can therefore help to apply a systematic test. There are two things you can do to test where a subject starts and stops.

First, a subject will always form a single unit in the sentence. That means you can always replace the complete subject with a pronoun. For both examples above, you could use *It*.

TIP

Some (but not all) pronouns have different forms when they are used as a subject than when they are used in other places in the sentence. If the pronoun you substitute sounds right when you say *I*, *we*, *he*, *she*, or *they*, it's a subject. If it sounds natural to use *me*, *us*, *him*, *her*, or *them*, the phrase is almost certainly not a subject, and you generally don't have to worry about the exceptions for the SAT. See section on **case** in the [Pronoun Agreement](#) module for more on this point.

This pronoun-substitution test tells you that the string of words you're looking at (for example, "The baseball team from Wilson University") forms a single unit, and when you make the substitution, the sentence may be simple enough that you can see the pattern *pronoun + verb* ("It defeated...", etc.)

However the pronoun-substitution test works for *any* noun phrase, not just subjects, and some pronouns, like *it*, have the same form whether used as a subject or elsewhere. There's one more test you can apply to be sure you're actually looking at a subject, even if you don't see the *pronoun + verb* pattern when you try the pronoun-substitution test. It involves comparing a statement with a related yes-no question formed from that statement.

Notice the pattern in the following examples:

Did the baseball team from Wilson University defeat the local minor league franchise?

Was Tabitha expecting me to return her phone call?

Could the mayor run for congress in the next election?

In any yes-no question, there is an auxiliary verb before the subject and the main verb after it, so you can use these words to mark the boundary of the complete subject.

Simple Subjects

Some sentences can have subjects that are only one word:

Birds have feathers.

However, the subjects you will see on the SAT are often much more complicated. For subject-verb agreement questions, it's often necessary to find the single core word in the subject that is its main element—traditionally called the **simple subject**. The simple subject is important because this is the word that (when there is only one) determines whether the subject is singular or plural.

Possessives, adjectives, and other modifiers frequently make the simple subject harder to identify. Finding the simple subject is a matter of “peeling off” such modifiers until you're left with just the core word.

Possessives are easy to identify: they'll end in 's or s' for nouns or be a **possessive pronoun**. These will never be the simple subject. You should also disregard adjectives and other **modifiers**.

The University of North Carolina's debate club hosts a competition each year.

Diagram labels:
- possessive: The University of North Carolina's
- modifier: debate
- simple subject: club
- complete subject: The University of North Carolina's debate club

Compound Subjects

Some subjects don't have a single word you can point to as the simple subject, in particular those where two or more phrases are connected with the coordinators *and* and *or*: "Jules and Julia", "coffee or tea".

The rules for coordinated subjects are simple: the word **and** almost always signals that there is "more than one" subject.

There are exceptions when the thing that contains *and* is viewed as a single entity rather than two separate things. For example, we say "drinking and driving *is* (not *are*) illegal." But the SAT hasn't put one of these types on the test in a very long time, so you're unlikely to encounter one.

WARNING

Remember that if *and* is used to create a compound object of a preposition, or if it appears inside an interruption, you still cut it out and ignore it.

EXAMPLE

The several studies have found that the combination of high consumption of fruits and vegetables and low intake of saturated fats are healthier than either alone.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) were
- C) is
- D) have been

This sentence has two *ands* in the complete subject for the verb "are", but both are inside preposition phrases. You are, therefore, not dealing with a compound subject joined by "and". Delete "of high ... fats" to remove all the preposition phrases. You are left with "the combination *are*", a singular subject that does not match the plural verb.

Choice C is the only one with a singular verb and is therefore correct.

Though "and" almost always signals "more than one" (meaning, that you need a plural verb to match the plural subject), **Or** and *nor* do not automatically make the phrases you are connecting plural. That's because "or" and "nor" offer a choice between two things, but not both added together. If you have two singular noun phrases, their coordination will be singular. If they are both plural, the coordination will be plural. Whichever the case, you'll have to make this singular or plural subject agree with the verb in number.

The case where one is singular and the other is plural does not appear on the SAT. However, if you ever encounter this situation in your own writing, the most widely followed rule is to make the verb agree with the closest noun phrase.



TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

In basic sentences, the simple subject often comes right before the verb. However, as sentences become longer and more complicated, modifiers may come between the subject and the verb. Eliminate all modifiers when you are looking for the simple subject.

Practice: Identify Simple Subjects (Quiz #1)

Identify the **simple subject** in the following sentences.

1

Wells Fargo made an error in your bank account.

- A) Wells Fargo
- B) error
- C) bank
- D) account



SOLUTION

Choice A is correct. It is a proper name (so there is more than one word in the simple subject.) There are no modifiers to be removed from this subject, so the complete subject is the same as the simple subject.

2

Aimee Gorham's stained glass artwork touches upon religious themes.

- A) Aimee Gorham
- B) glass
- C) artwork
- D) touches



SOLUTION

Choice C is correct: "artwork" is the simple subject. We could simplify the sentence to read "The artwork touches upon religious themes."

Choice A is incorrect: "Aimee Gorham" is not the simple subject. It is a possessive noun modifying the noun artwork.

Choice B is incorrect: “glass” is not the simple subject. It is a modifier describing the kind of artwork. The sentence is not telling us that “glass touches upon religious themes”; it is telling us that “the artwork touches upon religious themes”.

Choice D is incorrect: “touches” is not the simple subject. It is the verb.

3

The cheese crackers normally taste fine to me.

- A) cheese
- B) crackers
- C) taste
- D) me



SOLUTION

Choice A is incorrect: “cheese” is a modifier here. It’s telling us *what kind* of crackers normally taste fine. Therefore, it is not the simple subject of the verb “taste”. The sentence isn’t telling us that “cheese” tastes fine. It’s telling us that the crackers (which are cheese-flavored) taste fine.

Choice B is correct: the plural noun “crackers” is the simple subject of the verb “taste”.

Choice C is incorrect: “taste” is not the simple subject. It is a verb.

Choice D is incorrect: “me” is not the simple subject. It is part of a preposition phrase (“to me”). Remember also that *me* is the wrong form to be a subject of any sentence (“Me like crackers” is not correct). For more on object pronouns, see the [Pronoun Agreement](#) module.

4

Australian rules football teams have eighteen players: six forwards, six defenders, and six midfielders.

- A) rules
- B) football
- C) teams
- D) players



SOLUTION

Choice C is correct: “teams” is the noun that remains after all other modifiers are eliminated. It also agrees with the verb “have.” Therefore, it is the correct answer.

Choice A is incorrect: “rules” is a modifier. It (in combination with “Australian”) describes the specific type of football.

Choice B is incorrect: “football” is a modifier. It is explaining the type of “teams” the sentence is referring to. Additionally, “football” is singular, so it could not agree with the verb “have.”

Choice D is incorrect: “players” follows the verb “have.” If you substitute a pronoun for “eighteen players”, you must use *them*, which cannot be used as a subject.

5

Has Bob been my friend?

- A) Has
- B) Bob
- C) my
- D) friend



SOLUTION

Choice B is correct. This sentence is already in a question form. Notice that the verbs *has* and *been* appear on either side of the subject.

Choice A is incorrect. “Has” is an **auxiliary verb**.

Choice C is incorrect. “My” is a possessive pronoun, and possessives are never the simple subject.

Choice D is incorrect. “Friend” is part of the phrase that comes after the verb (traditionally called a complement).

6

The innovative surgery was performed by a team from the Mayo Clinic.

- A) innovative
- B) surgery
- C) team
- D) Mayo Clinic



SOLUTION

Choice B is correct. This is the topic of the sentence. If you apply the question-test, you will get “*Was the innovative surgery performed...*”, showing that the complete subject is “the innovative surgery”. *Surgery* is the core word in this phrase and is therefore the simple subject. Both *the* and *innovative* add specifying or modifying information about it.

Choice A is incorrect. “Innovative” is an adjective modifying “surgery”. It’s part of the complete subject, but not the simple subject.

Choice C is incorrect. Although the team is doing the action in this sentence, it is not the subject. It’s part of a preposition phrase (“by a team from the Mayo Clinic”).

Choice D is incorrect. This proper noun is part of the preposition phrase “from the Mayo Clinic”.

7

In the hot sun rested a cheerful girl.

- A) sun
- B) rested
- C) cheerful
- D) girl



SOLUTION

Choice D is correct. In this sentence, the subject is *not* in front of the verb as normal, but if you apply the question test, you will naturally rearrange the sentence into a more standard word order: “*Did a cheerful girl rest in the hot sun?*” The verbs *did* and *rest* surround the complete subject. Within the subject, *girl* is the core word. Both *a* and *cheerful* add specifying or modifying information about it.

Choice A is incorrect. “Sun” is part of the preposition phrase that opens the sentence, but it is not part of the subject.

Choice B is incorrect. “Rested” is the verb.

Choice C is incorrect. “Cheerful” is an adjective modifying “girl”, which is the simple subject.

Interruptions between the Subject and Verb

How to avoid confusion caused by interruptions between the subject and the verb

Estimated time: 10 minutes

The SAT has a variety of ways to hide the simple subject from you, often by placing distractions between the simple subject and the verb. These words can make you forget the simple subject and confuse your intuition, so that a sentence that is incorrect can sound right.

One frequent way the SAT creates such a distraction is with an **interruption** between a subject and a verb.

A pair of commas, parentheses, or dashes indicates that the information contained between them is an interruption from the main part of the sentence. This is true *even if* the logic of the interruption suggests that it is combining with the simple subject to make a plural (or compound) subject.



TIP

To avoid being confused by interruptions, it's good practice to cross them out in your test booklet.



EXAMPLE

This evidence, along with the identification of several previously unknown rock inscriptions, has caused scholars to reconsider the idea that hieroglyphs were generally only a few centimeters in size.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) have
- C) which have
- D) which has

Notice the pair of commas separating “along with the identification of several previously unknown rock inscriptions” from the rest of the sentence indicate that the information contained between them is an interruption, and not part of the subject.

It does not matter that “along with” in this context is roughly equivalent in meaning to *and*. The information in an interruption never changes whether the subject is singular or plural, no matter what it is.

This evidence, ~~along with the identification of several previously unknown rock inscriptions~~, *has* caused scholars to reconsider the idea that hieroglyphs were generally only a few centimeters in size.

Once we have eliminated the interruption, it becomes obvious that the subject is “this evidence,” which is singular. Choice A, “has,” agrees with a singular noun, while Choice B, “have,” does not. Choices C and D both create fragments.

Therefore, Choice A is correct.

 **WARNING**

Remember that just because you see two commas in a sentence does not by itself make what comes between them an interruption. See the [Punctuating Interruptions](#) module for more on how to identify what is, and is not, an interruption.

Interruptions can contain their own subject-verb pairs, and there can occasionally be two or more interruptions between the subject and the verb. If you're approaching interruptions by elimination, these patterns shouldn't confuse you.

Hélène Gordon-Lazareff, who founded *Elle*, the world's most widely distributed fashion magazine, spent several years studying tribal customs in Sudan.

In this example, there are two interruptions between the verb *spent* and its subject, "Hélène Gordon-Lazareff". One of them contains a pronoun-verb pair ("who founded"). But you don't need to consider that pair. Start from the underlined verb, *spent*, and work backwards, eliminating each interruption in turn. That leaves you with the simple subject.

 **TAKE-HOME MESSAGE**

Starting with the verb and working to your left, you should delete any interruptions between the subject and the verb.

After you have found the simple subject, check that the verb agrees in number (singular or plural) with that simple subject.

Preposition Phrases

Identifying preposition phrases that come between the simple subject and the verb

Estimated time: 10 minutes

A particularly common way that the SAT tries to hide the simple subject from you is with preposition phrases that come between the simple subject and verb.

EXAMPLE

Protection of trees on mountaintops near flood-prone areas enable conservationists to prevent the erosion of soil during heavy downpours.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) have enabled
- C) are enabling
- D) is enabling

The simple subject of this sentence is “Protection”, a singular noun, and so the correct answer is Choice D because it has a singular verb, “is”. Choices A, B, and C all have plural verbs, so they are incorrect .

To understand exactly why this is so, you need to understand how prepositions and preposition phrases work.

You were probably taught about prepositions at some point in school, but don't worry if you've forgotten what they are. We'll review them here.

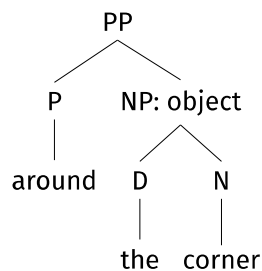
DICTIONARY

preposition

Prepositions are function words, usually short, which indicate location, direction, position, or relationship, such as *along, in, on, for, with, or of*.

A preposition phrase normally starts with the preposition and is followed by a **noun phrase**. (Remember that phrases can be only one word, so the noun phrase can be one noun or pronoun.) That noun phrase is traditionally called the “object of the preposition.”

Some people find it helpful to picture the relationship between the parts of the preposition phrase graphically:



This diagram shows that the object of the preposition, a noun phrase (NP), is contained within a preposition phrase (PP). And because this object of the preposition is “hiding” inside the preposition phrase, it does not play any role in

subject-verb agreement, even when the preposition phrase is itself a part of the complete subject.

Consider the following sentence:

The former **prime ministers of Japan** are coming.

In the above example, “prime ministers” is the simple subject. It’s the prime ministers who are coming, not Japan.

The prepositions that are easiest to identify indicate spatial relationships, either literally (“around the corner”) or figuratively (“beyond belief”). Some prepositions, though, have a mostly grammatical function and it’s very hard to pin down a specific meaning. By far the most common example of this third type is *of*. It’s worth memorizing the fact that *of* is a preposition.

You should normally ignore preposition phrases when you are trying to identify the simple subject—you can cross them out much as you do interruption—but they are crucial to understanding subject-verb agreement questions.

Because they often come between the simple subject and the verb, and because preposition phrases themselves contain noun phrases, the SAT will try to confuse you by giving you a series of noun phrases that have the opposite number from the simple subject. That is, if the simple subject is singular, you’re likely to see plural nouns as part of one or more preposition phrases, or vice versa.

In the opening example about trees, there are three preposition phrases between the simple subject and the verb. Technically, these phrases are nested inside each other, but for the purpose of finding the simple subject, all you have to do is start at the underlined verb and work to your left, crossing out each preposition and its object (or whatever is left of it) as you go.

Protection (3) ~~of trees~~ (2) ~~on mountaintops~~ (1) ~~near flood-prone areas~~ enable conservationists to prevent the erosion of soil during heavy downpours.

The numbers show you the order in which to cross out the preposition phrases.

As more and more preposition phrases are placed between the simple subject and the verb, it becomes much more difficult to locate the simple subject intuitively. But if you simply eliminate these phrases, no matter how many there are, you will reveal the simple subject.

Plans (5) *for surveying the extent of the damage to barns and farmhouses in the immediate vicinity of the recent forest fires* are being developed.

Plans ~~for surveying the extent~~ (4) ~~of the damage~~ (3) ~~to barns and farmhouses~~ (2) ~~in the immediate vicinity~~ (1) ~~of the recent forest fires~~ are being developed.

Plans are being developed.

As with the previous example, it’s unnecessary to worry about exactly how the preposition phrases are related to each other. Simply delete each preposition and its object (the noun and its associated words like *the*). You will be

left with the simple subject.

Sometimes, you might recognize a preposition but aren't quite sure how much of what follows is part of the object of the preposition. Perhaps there are words that don't look like either prepositions or nouns and you're not quite sure how they relate. In this case, you can use a version of the same pronoun-substitution test that we used to find out what the complete subject was. If you replace what comes after the preposition with a pronoun (or sometimes the word *there*) and the revised sentence sounds right, you've probably got the whole phrase.

In the example above, we could replace "surveying the extent of the damage to barns and farmhouses in the immediate vicinity of the recent forest fires" with one word: *it*.

Plans for *it* are being developed.

That one phrase itself contains preposition phrases inside of preposition phrases, but the fact that we can substitute the whole string for one word tells us that it's a single unit, and we can delete it, along with its preposition, all at once.

Practice: Subjects with Basic Distractions (Quiz #2)

1

Astronaut candidates, regardless of their previous experience, has to complete at least two years of NASA training before being allowed to take part in a mission.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) has had
- C) having
- D) have



SOLUTION

First cross off the interruption, "regardless of their previous experience". Then recognize that "Astronaut" modifies "candidates"—it tells us what kind of candidates we're talking about. The simple subject is therefore "candidates", which is plural. If we simplify the sentence, it reads "Candidates have to complete at least two years of NASA training before being allowed to take part in a mission."

The only choice with a plural verb is Choice D, "have", and therefore Choice D is correct.

Choices A and B use the singular verb "had", which does not agree with the plural simple subject, "candidates".

Choice C is incorrect because it creates a fragment.

2

The photographs, including those taken by Pittsburgh-based photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris over the span of some forty years, allows viewers to gain unprecedented insight into the mid-century African American urban experience.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) allow
- C) has allowed
- D) which allows



SOLUTION

Starting with the underlined verb, look to the left and notice the interruption. After you eliminate it, you are left with “The photographs allows...” The plural subject, “the photographs”, does not agree with the singular verb “allows”. Choice A is therefore incorrect.

Choice B is correct: “allow” agrees with a plural subject and is the only plural verb among the choices.

Choice C is incorrect: “has” is a singular verb and does not agree with “The photographs”.

Choice D is incorrect: not only is “allows” a singular verb, but “which” also makes the sentence a fragment.

3

These libraries, which were built thanks to the philanthropy of steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, has continued to provide educational opportunities for people across the United States.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) continues
- C) continue
- D) is continuing



SOLUTION

Starting with the underlined verb, look to the left and notice the interruption. After you eliminate it, you are left with “These libraries has continued...” The simple subject of the underlined verb is “libraries”, which is plural.

Only Choice C, “continue”, is also plural. It is therefore correct.

Choice A is incorrect: “has” is a singular verb, but the subject is plural.

Choice B is incorrect: “continues” is a singular verb, but the subject is plural.

Choice D is incorrect: “is” can only agree with a singular subject, but the subject is plural.

4

The dramatic habitat loss of species in the world’s major river systems are primarily the result of overfishing and pollution.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) were being
- D) have been



SOLUTION

Start off by identifying the simple subject. The prepositions *of* and *in* mark the start of two preposition phrases, so “of species in the world’s major river systems” can be ignored. Now you are left with “the dramatic habitat loss.” The words “dramatic” and “habitat” are both modifiers that tell you about kind of loss (“habitat”) and the extent of the loss (“dramatic”). They can be eliminated. The simple subject is therefore loss. The word “loss” is singular, and therefore the verb must be singular.

Choice B is correct. We can simplify the sentence so that it says “The (dramatic habitat) loss is primarily the result of overfishing and pollution.”

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. These answer choices all include verbs that are plural, and that therefore do not agree with the simple subject, “loss.”

5

Joseph Haydn’s capacity for generating unique musical motifs and inventive compositional structures have earned him the title “Father of the Symphony.”

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) has earned
- C) that earned
- D) were earning



SOLUTION

First identify the preposition phrase, here beginning with “for”. You can use the substitution test (“capacity for this”) to tell that “for generating unique musical motifs and inventive compositional structures” is all one preposition phrase. You should also delete the possessive proper name “Joseph Haydn’s”, leaving the simple subject, “capacity”. This is a singular noun, and only Choice B has a singular verb (“has”). Therefore, it is correct.

Choice A is incorrect because it uses the plural verb “have” for a singular subject.

Choice C is incorrect because “that” turns the whole sentence into a fragment. See The [Fragments](#) module for more on this point.

Choice D is incorrect because it uses the plural verb “were” for a singular subject.

6

The increasing prevalence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE International, the Clinton Health Access Initiative, and Heifer International have been considered by some as proof that the world is becoming more interconnected.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) are
- D) were



SOLUTION

Start by identifying the simple subject by elimination. The phrase “of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” is a preposition phrase. Eliminate it. The words “such as” begins another modifier that provides additional examples of these organizations. It can likewise be eliminated. Now, you are left with “The increasing prevalence” as a subject. Since the word “increasing” is a modifier that describes “prevalence” it is not the simple subject. The simple subject is “prevalence,” which is singular.

Choice B is correct. The verb “is” agrees with the singular subject “prevalence”. A simplified version of the sentence reads: “The prevalence is considered by some as proof that the world is becoming more interconnected.”

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. These answer choices all include verbs that can only agree with plural subjects, but the simple subject of the sentence “prevalence” is singular.

Modifiers After the Simple Subject

How to identify modifiers other than preposition phrases that appear after the simple subject

Estimated time: 10 minutes

A variety of modifiers other than preposition phrases can appear after the simple subject.

Participle Phrases

Phrases built around the **progressive participle** or the **passive participle** are often used as noun modifiers.

EXAMPLE

Each Stuyvesant High School student attending the summer programs are allowed to decide whether to live on the university's campus or in off-campus housing, and, if necessary, roommate assignments can be made by the programs' coordinators.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) were
- C) have been
- D) is

The phrase "attending the summer programs" is describing "Each Stuyvesant High School student," so it is a modifier that can be eliminated from the sentence.

If we want to simplify the subject further, we could also eliminate "Stuyvesant High School", which is also a modifier of "student", as well as "Each", leaving the simple subject, "student". Since this subject is singular, only Choice D ("is") works.

Students who get questions like this wrong may assume that "programs" is the simple subject, but it's actually part of the participle phrase and only a modifier.

Here are other examples of participle phrases acting as noun modifiers. Notice that these phrases often also include preposition phrases.

Falcons **injured in their natural habitat** benefit from the program, which has been in existence since 1990.

The joggers **running along the side of the road** were wearing reflective vests for safety.

The new ceramic dishes **purchased by the catering company** have not arrived at its headquarters yet.

The figures **drawn in the sketchpad** demonstrate the artist's ability to reproduce a range of artistic styles, including cubism, modernism, and neoclassicism.

Clause Modifiers

When a subordinate clause modifies a noun, it can be particularly confusing because subordinate clauses have their own subjects and verbs.



EXAMPLE

According to several new studies, Doctors who show compassion is less likely to be sued for malpractice, even when things go wrong with the treatment.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) has been
- C) was
- D) are

In the example above, the simple subject is separated from the verb by a subordinate clause, “who show compassion”. The subject of this clause is “who” (referring to “Doctors”), and the verb is “show”.

These clauses often begin with one of a few keywords: *that*, *who*, *whose*, *where*, or *when*. They can also begin with a preposition followed by the word *which* or *whom*, such as *in which*, *during which*, or *for whom*.

These clauses modify nouns—in other words, they add description. That means that they can usually be treated the same way as interruptions when we are trying to find the simple subject and the corresponding verb.

Be careful, however, that you have matched up the right subject to the right verb. Sometimes, as in the example above, the subject in the subordinate clause refers to the same subject as the main clause. But in other cases, each verb will have a different subject, and the verb that’s underlined isn’t always the main verb.

Let’s look at a trickier example:



EXAMPLE

The benefits the company’s typical employee receive have declined significantly since its founding, leading to a mass exodus of skilled workers from several of its divisions.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) have received
- C) receives
- D) are receiving

If you thought that “benefits” was the simple subject of the sentence, you were right. But the underlined verb does not belong with “benefits”. The benefits aren’t receiving something. The verbs that go with “benefits” are “have declined”. In short, this sentence includes two subjects and two verbs.

Notice that the underlined verb is in a subordinate clause that modifies *benefits*: “the company’s typical employee receive.” If we’re doing our normal elimination to find the simple subject of the whole sentence, we would cross out this whole clause, including the verb “receive”.

However, since we’re supposed to check the verb “receive”, we can’t eliminate the clause that it’s a part of. Instead, we have to look inside the subordinate clause to find the subject. In most cases, you will be able to tell what the

logical subject is from the meaning of the sentence without worrying too much about the details of the structure. Ask yourself what subject logically matches the underlined verb—here, “receive”? Is it “benefits”? Or “the company’s typical employee”? It’s the latter, so Choice C is correct: “the ... employee receives”. Choices A, B, and D are wrong because they feature plural verbs that don’t match the singular subject (“employee”).

For more on subordinate clauses, see the [About Clauses](#) module.

Unusual Sentence Patterns

Identify uncommon sentence patterns that can lead to tricky subject-verb agreement problems

Estimated time: 10 minutes

Inverted Structure

In most English sentences (and in all the examples so far in this module), the main subject of the sentence comes before the verb.

However, in some cases, this order can be reversed, and the subject comes after the verb, a pattern known as subject-verb inversion. A common example occurs when the sentence begins with the adverb *here*:

Ordinary: My homework is here.

Inverted: Here is my homework.

In the second sentence above, the subject is still “my homework”, but it comes after the verb.

On the SAT, you’re most likely to encounter inversion in a sentence that begins with a preposition phrase:

Ordinary: Three children descended from the bus.

Inverted: From the bus descended three children.

In these examples, the subject is “three children” in both cases. Only, the order of the phrases has changed.

This pattern is somewhat uncommon outside of literary, written English and may feel unnatural to you, but it’s perfectly correct. Remember that prepositional phrases cannot be the subject on their own, and “the bus” is part of the preposition phrase. Also, it’s the “children” that are descending; this subject (“children”) has a closer relationship with this verb (“descended”).

The reason this pattern is tested on the SAT is that it’s tricky: if you’re not careful, you’ll mistake the first noun (like “bus”) for the simple subject, since you’re usually looking for the subject to come before the verb.

Another situation closely related to the one above occurs when the sentence begins with “There”.

There were three children on the bus.

There is a child on the bus.

Technically, *there* is the grammatical subject in these sentence—it’s sometimes called a “dummy subject” because it has no real meaning of its own. But like the inverted sentences, we have to look at the noun phrase that comes after the verb—sometimes called the “logical subject”—to see whether the verb should be singular or plural.

One way that you can identify the subject of these sentences is to “uninvert” them—that is, to rearrange them so that the subject is next to the verb.

For example:

✗ There was many exciting movies playing at that movie theater.

✗ Many exciting movies was playing at that movie theater.

✓ Many exciting movies were playing at that movie theater.

Notice that it’s easier to identify the subject-verb agreement error when the subject is directly next to the verb.

 **EXAMPLE**

Among the most muscular of the competitors were a triathlete affectionately known as “the Hulk.”

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) being
- C) are
- D) was

The phrases “Among the most muscular of the competitors” is a preposition phrase. (It also contains another preposition phrase, “of the competitors”). Eliminate it. The phrase “affectionately known as ‘the Hulk’” is a modifier telling us which triathlete is meant. It also can be ignored. The simple subject is therefore “triathlete”, which is singular.

Choice D is correct. Only the verb “was” can agree with a singular subject. To check your answer, you can “uninvert” the simplified sentence as follows: “A triathlete was among the most muscular of the competitors”.

When the Subject is Not a Noun Phrase

Although the subject for most verbs will be either a noun phrase or noun phrases linked with a coordinator like *and* or *or*, some subjects are actually clauses or phrases other than noun phrases

For many of these subjects, there won't be an intuitively obvious simple subject. Fortunately, these subjects are always singular, so you don't actually need to identify the simple subject as long as you recognize that the subject is one of these types. Don't be misled by plural noun phrases that might be buried inside the complete subject.

EXAMPLE

Taking on entrenched business interests often lead to prolonged courtroom battles, but successful class-action lawsuits, although rare, can bring tens of millions of dollars into the prosecuting law firms' coffers.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are leading
- C) have led
- D) leads

The complete subject of "lead" is "Taking on entrenched business interests", which is traditionally called a **gerund**. Gerunds in English look exactly like phrases formed with the **progressive participle** (the *-ing* form of the verb). The only difference is that they are used where you would normally expect a noun phrase. You can substitute a pronoun for one, and you'll notice that it's natural to use *it*. That's because this is a singular subject.

Only Choice D agrees with a singular subject and is correct.

In addition to gerunds, you will also find **infinitive** phrases and **content clauses** occasionally used as subjects:

Infinitive phrase: To keep friends after college is challenging for many people.

Content clause: That many people refuse to change their minds despite being presented with clear evidence and reasons is a depressing but unsurprising fact of human nature.

In the examples above, the complete subjects are highlighted. Notice that the main verb in each sentence, *is*, is singular. Even though there are plural noun phrases inside the subject, these play no part in subject-verb agreement.

Quantifying Expressions

Although in most cases preposition phrases can be eliminated from sentences, there is one situation where you have to consider what comes after the preposition *of*.

Notice the following examples:

Most of the food has been eaten.

Most of the sandwiches have been eaten.

A majority of the water was polluted.

A majority of the rivers were polluted.

One fifth of the questions were too difficult.

One fifth of the class was absent.

In each case, the verb changes depending on whether the noun phrase after the *of* is singular or plural. Notice in particular, the fact that even the use of *one*, doesn't necessarily mean that the subject itself is singular and should take a singular verb. For "one fifth of the questions", the verb is plural to match with "questions", but for "one fifth of the class", the verb is singular to match "class".

Expressions such as *some of*, *all of*, *most of*, and *many of* can be singular or plural, as can expressions indicating a portion such as *half of*, *the majority of*, or *seventy-five percent of*.

In these cases, simply eliminate the quantifying expression as well as the word "of" and check the noun phrase that comes immediately after to determine the number of the subject.

EXAMPLE

Some of the people surveyed by the newspaper, including the newly-elected president of the university's student council, Janet Finnegan, agrees with the decision.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) agreeing
- C) agree
- D) has agreed

The phrase “surveyed by the newspaper” is a modifier, providing additional detail about “the people”, so it can be eliminated. Also, the phrase inside the commas (“including ... Finnegan”) contains two interruptions back to back. Eliminate them as well. You are left with the simplified sentence “Some of the people agrees with the decision”. That might be enough for you to tell that the subject is plural intuitively, but if not, notice that the quantifying expression “some of” is a quantifier that doesn’t tell us by itself whether the subject is singular or plural, and so you can eliminate it, leaving only “the people”, a singular subject.

Choice C is correct: “agree” is the only plural verb among the choices, and it matches the plural subject “the people”.

Choices A and D are incorrect because they both use singular verbs for a plural subject.

Choice B is incorrect because “agreeing” creates a fragment.

Particularly worth noting is the difference between “the number of” and “a number of”.

The number of students *is* limited.

A number of students *are* late.

In the first example, “the number of” is *not* a quantifying expression. “The number” refers to a specific quantity. It’s an ordinary noun, and the complete subject behaves just as you expect: ignore the preposition phrase, and the simple subject is the singular noun “number”.

In the second example, “a number of” doesn’t actually refer to a specific number. It means an indefinite quantity of something, and as with other quantifying expressions, the plural noun after the *of* makes the complete subject plural and requires a plural verb.

EXAMPLE

The number of Americans with college degrees have been rising at a rapid pace, with over 3.9 million college degrees awarded in 2019 alone.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are
- C) is
- D) were

First, identify the subject. Eliminate the preposition phrases “of Americans” and “with college degrees”. The simple subject is the phrase “the number”. Remember, this phrase is singular and can be replaced with the pronoun “it”.

Choice C is the correct answer since it includes the verb “is”, which agrees with a singular subject. A simplified version of the sentence reads: “The number is rising at a rapid pace”.

Choices A, B, and D are incorrect. These answers include verbs (“have,” “are,” and “were”) that could only agree with a plural subject. Students who chose one of these answers may have mistakenly thought that the word “Americans” was the subject.

Practice: Subjects with Complex Distractions (Quiz #3)

1

Patrons requiring any form of assistance are asked to contact one of the customer service representatives at the front desk.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) was
- C) is
- D) has been



SOLUTION

First, identify the subject. Notice that the phrase “requiring any form of assistance” is a modifier describing certain kinds of “patrons”. You can eliminate it. The simple subject is “Patrons”, which is plural.

Choice A is correct. The verb “are” agrees with a plural subject. A simplified version of the sentence reads: “Patrons are asked to contact one of the customer service representatives at the front desk”.

Choices B, C, and D are incorrect. The verbs “was”, “is”, and “has” can only agree with a singular subject. The simple subject of the sentence, “patrons”, is plural.

2

The time the average person devotes to fitness-related activities have been increasing over the last few decades.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) has been
- C) were
- D) are



SOLUTION

The verb within the subordinate clause, “devotes”, is not underlined, so this modifier can be eliminated. The clause “the average person devotes to fitness-related activities” is describing a kind of time.

After eliminating this modifier, the remaining part of the subject of the underlined verb is “the time,” which is singular.

Choice B is correct: “has” is the only singular verb among the choices.

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. Each of these uses a plural verb for a singular subject.

3

As the research subjects attempt to recall the word list, two or three researchers who have been trained to recognize every type of anxiety are present.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) has been
- C) is
- D) was



SOLUTION

This sentence actually contains three subject-verb pairs, so be careful to identify the subject for “are” and not for one of the other verbs.

Start by eliminating the opening subordinate clause (“As ... list”). Next, notice that “who have been trained to recognize every type of anxiety” is a clause that tells us what kind of researchers we’re focusing on. It’s a modifier, so eliminate it. The remaining subject is “two or three researchers”, which is plural.

Choice A is correct. The verb “are” agrees with the plural subject “researchers”.

Choice B is incorrect. The verb “has” cannot agree with a plural subject.

Choice C is incorrect. The verb “is” can only agree with a singular subject.

Choice D is incorrect. The verb “was” can only agree with a singular subject.

4

The discredited theory that bumps and indentations on a person’s skull can provide information about his or her personality traits are known as phrenology.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) being
- C) were
- D) is



SOLUTION

First, identify the simple subject. Eliminate the subordinate clause “that bumps and indentations on a person’s skull can provide information about his or her personality traits”. This clause simply provides information about “theory”, which is the simple subject and is singular.

If you got this question wrong, you may have thought that “bumps and indentations” or “traits” was the subject for “are”, but these are both inside of a subordinate clause that modifies “theory”. Though “bumps and indentations on a person’s skull” *is* a subject, it’s the subject for “can provide”, not “are”, and “personality traits” is the object of the preposition *about*.

Choice D is correct. The verb “is” agrees with the singular subject.

Choice A is incorrect. The verb “are” is plural and doesn’t match the singular subject “theory”.

Choice B is incorrect. The word “being” creates a fragment because “being ... phrenology” becomes a modifier of “theory”, and then there’s no conjugated verb.

Choice C is incorrect. The verb “were” can only agree with a plural subject, but the subject is singular.

5

The public health officials were disappointed to find that half of the samples included in their study was affected by the gas leak.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) were
- C) has been
- D) is



SOLUTION

First, identify the simple subject of the underlined verb. It's not "officials", since that simple subject goes with the verb "were" and with the subject complement "disappointed". Look, instead for something (or things) that's been affected.

The phrase "included in their study" is a modifier, so you should eliminate it. Now, notice that you are left with "half of the samples". Remember, since "half of" is a fraction, we *cannot* eliminate the phrase "of samples". In fact, we can treat "samples", which is plural, as the simple subject.

Choice B is correct. The plural verb "were" agrees with the plural subject "half of the samples."

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. Each of these choices includes a verb ("was", "has", and "is", respectively) that can only agree with a singular subject, not with "samples".

6

Determining the ages of the fossils are incredibly challenging work, requiring the use of sophisticated radio-carbon dating technologies.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) were
- D) have been



SOLUTION

First, identify the subject. In this sentence, the subject is "Determining the ages of the fossils", a gerund phrase. Recall that if a gerund phrase is the subject, it is always singular, meaning that such words and phrases can be replaced by the pronoun "it".

Choice B is correct. The verb "is" agrees with the singular subject "determining the ages of the fossils". We could simplify the sentence to read: "It is incredibly challenging work".

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. Each of these choices includes verbs ("are", "were", and "have been", respectively) that can only agree with a plural subject. Students who chose one of these answer choices likely thought that the word "ages" or the word "fossils" was the simple subject.

Review

- When a verb is underlined, always check for subject-verb agreement.
- In complex sentences, your intuition can be mistaken, so don't just rely on what "sounds right".

- In ordinary sentences, the subject comes before the verb.
- Some sentences, especially those that open with a preposition phrase, can flip the order of the subject and the verb: “Above London hovered hundreds of balloons, defense against German bombers”.
- Find the simple subject and verify that it’s the correct number (singular or plural) to match the verb.
- To find the simple subject, delete the interruptions, preposition phrases, and other modifiers until you’re left with just a central noun. Then check that the number of this noun matches the number of its verb.
- Complex sentences often have more than one clause, which means there may be more than one subject-verb pair in a sentence. Make sure you’re looking at the right subject.
- If all of the choices feature plural verbs, but only one choice features a singular verb, it’s likely that the lone singular verb is the correct answer—or vice versa. There are only two numbers (singular or plural). So if the question isn’t also testing tense at the same time as subject-verb agreement, the answer choice that is different from the others in number is probably the correct one.

Subject-Verb Agreement Review (Quiz #4)

1

The use of self-driving (or autonomous) cars by ridesharing companies like Uber and Lyft are expected to expand dramatically.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) have been
- D) were



SOLUTION

Identify the simple subject by eliminating the modifiers and interruptions. The phrase “(or autonomous)” is an interruption, while “of self-driving cars”, “by ridesharing companies”, and “like Uber and Lyft” are preposition phrases. They can be eliminated. Now you are left with the phrase “The use”, which is a singular subject.

Choice B is correct. The verb “is” agrees with the simple subject here (“use”). A simplified version of the sentence reads: “The use is expected to expand dramatically”.

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. These answer choices all include plural verbs (“are”, “have”, and “were”) that cannot agree with a singular subject.

2

Most regions currently observing daylight savings time are located in the northern hemisphere.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) has been
- D) was



SOLUTION

Identify the simple subject by eliminating the modifiers. Notice that the phrase “currently observing daylight savings time” is a modifier describing certain kinds of “regions.” The word “most” is also a modifier describing “regions”. All these modifiers can be eliminated. The simple subject is “regions”, and it is plural.

Choice A is correct. The verb “are” agrees with a plural subject. A simplified version of the sentence reads: “Regions are located in the northern hemisphere.”

Choices B, C and D are incorrect. The verbs “is”, “has”, and “was” can only agree with a singular subject, but the simple subject of the sentence, “regions”, is plural.

3

According to Arturo Perez, one of the world’s foremost biofuel experts, challenges include receiving funding for long-term projects that is making use of sugarcane and corn-based energy sources.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) makes
- C) has made
- D) make



SOLUTION

Identify the subject by eliminating the modifiers and interruptions. In this case, the underlined verb is within a subordinate clause. The grammatical subject of this subordinate clause is traditionally identified as “that”, but this doesn’t show us whether the subject is singular or plural. To determine this, you must figure out what the clause describes. It describes the word “projects”, which is plural: projects make use of sugarcane. That means the underlined verb needs to be plural.

Note that the subject is not “receiving funding for long term projects”. If you thought it was, you might have looked for a singular verb to match. But look at the verb. What is “making”? It’s not “receiving funding” that makes, but the “projects” (a plural subject) that make. Choice D is correct. The verb “make” is plural, which agrees with the plural antecedent of the pronoun “that”, which is the subject. Another clue that this is the right answer is that all of the choices feature singular verbs, except this one.

Choice A is incorrect. The verb “is” can only agree with a singular subject.

Choice B is incorrect. The verb “makes” is singular.

Choice C is incorrect. The verb “has” is singular.

4

Catherine Palace, one of the summer residences of Russia’s tsars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have been temporarily closed for maintenance.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are being
- C) are
- D) has been



SOLUTION

Starting with the underlined verb, look to the left and notice the interruption. After you eliminate it, you are left with “Catherine Palace have been...” Since the subject, “Catherine Palace”, is singular, the verb must be as well. Only Choice D, “has been”, contains a singular verb. It is therefore correct.

Choice A is incorrect: “have” is a plural verb but “Catherine Palace” is a singular subject.

Choices B and C are incorrect: “are” is a plural verb but “Catherine Palace” is a singular subject.

5

The fact that many customers still prefer to use cash, rather than digital alternatives, concern businesses planning to switch to an electronic payment based business model.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are what concern
- C) have concerned
- D) concerns



SOLUTION

First identify the subject. The phrase “that many customers still prefer to use case” is a subordinate clause and “rather than digital alternatives” is an interruption. These can be eliminated. “The fact” is the remaining subject, and it is singular.

You might also scan the choices and observe that all of them feature plural verbs (“concern”, “are”, “have”) except one: Choice D.

Choice D is correct. The verb “concerns” agrees with the singular simple subject “fact.” A simplified version of the sentence reads: “The fact ... concerns businesses planning to switch to an electronic payment based business model.”

Choices A, B, and C are incorrect. All of these choices include plural verbs that can only agree with a plural subject. Since “fact” is singular, these choices are wrong.

6

The most fertile types of topsoil utilized by soybean farmers contains nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and other mineral nutrients.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) contain
- C) containing
- D) has contained



SOLUTION

First identify the simple subject. The phrase “of topsoil utilized by soybean farmers” is a preposition phrase. It can be eliminated. Now the remaining part of the subject is “The most fertile types” as a possible subject. The words “most” and “fertile” are both modifiers, and they are therefore not the simple subject. The word “types” is the simple subject, and it is plural.

Choice B is correct. The verb “contain” agrees with this simple subject. A simplified version of the sentence reads: “The (most fertile) types contain nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium, and other minerals”.

Choices A and D are incorrect. Both of these choices include verbs (“contains” and “has”) that can only agree with a singular subject.

Choice C is incorrect. This choice creates a fragment. Remember, a complete sentence needs to include a subject and a verb has a tense. A participle does not have a tense.

7

There was a number of residents who felt that city officials had not taken appropriate action to protect the areas surrounding the stadium from night-time noise pollution.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) were
- D) has been



SOLUTION

It may be helpful to scan the choices and look for the verb that is different from all the others (the one that's plural when all the other verbs are singular, or the reverse). Here, all of the choices feature singular verbs, except Choice C which is plural. This suggests Choice C may be the correct answer.

You will still want to match the subject to the verb, though, so identify the simple subject. Remember, the word "there" is a dummy subject, so you'll need to look after the underlined verb to find whether the verb should be singular or plural. Notice that there's a long modifier describing the residents "who felt ... noise pollution." Eliminate it. What's left is "a number of residents". Remember that is one of the quantifying expressions where the noun after *of* tells you whether the verb should be seen as plural. Since the noun after "a number of" is always plural, the complete expression, "a number of residents" is also plural.

Choice C is correct. The verb "were" is plural and agrees with "a number of residents".

Choices A, B, and D are incorrect. These choices all include singular verbs ("was," "is," and "has") that do not match the plural "a number of residents".

8

A list of the inventions patented by Edison and Tesla demonstrate that both men had a range of interests outside electricity.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) demonstrating
- C) demonstrates
- D) have demonstrated



SOLUTION

To find the simple subject, first cross off the preposition phrases. What remains ("A list") is singular.

Choice C is correct: "demonstrates" is a singular verb and agrees with "list".

Choice A is incorrect: "demonstrate" is plural, but the subject is singular.

Choice B is incorrect: "demonstrating" creates a fragment.

Choice D is incorrect: "have" is plural, but the subject is singular.

Documents written in a language other than English has to be translated by an authorized translator, according to the university's application requirements.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) have
- C) is
- D) having



SOLUTION

First, identify the simple subject. Notice that the phrase “written in a language other than English” is a modifier describing a certain kinds of “documents”. You can eliminate it. The simple subject is “documents”, which is plural.

Choice B is correct. The verb “have” agrees with a plural subject. A simplified version of the sentence reads: “Documents have to be translated by an authorized translator, according to the university’s application requirements”.

Choices A and C are incorrect. The verbs “has” and “is” can only agree with a singular subject, but the simple subject of the sentence, “documents”, is plural.

Choice D is incorrect. Using the progressive participle (“having”) creates a fragment in this situation.

Between the two icebergs are a stretch of water that includes some of the Arctic’s most biologically active areas, populated by plankton, fish, and other sea animals.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) is
- C) were
- D) have been



SOLUTION

First, you need to identify the subject. Recognize that this is an inverted sentence. Because the phrase “between the two icebergs” is a preposition phrase, it does not contain the subject. The simple subject, “a stretch”, comes after the verb, and it is singular.

Choice B is correct. The verb “is” the only singular verb, and (more importantly) it agrees with the singular subject “a stretch” An uninverted version of the sentence reads: “A stretch [of water] is between the two icebergs”.

Choices A, C, and D are incorrect. The plural verbs “are”, “were”, and “have” can only agree with a plural subject. The simple subject of the sentence, “stretch”, is singular. If you picked one of these options, you may have mistakenly assumed that “icebergs” was the subject. However, this word is within a preposition phrase, so it is not the subject.