

Subject agreement

A question from Lachlan Brown:

Hello I have a question about when to use "is" and "are".

I was told by a friend that I sentence I wrote was incorrect because I used "is" when I should have used "are". The sentence I wrote was: "His biggest problem is his inaccuracies." My friend said I should have written: "His biggest problem are his inaccuracies."

My understanding of how to use these words is that "is" is used when talking about a singular noun and "are" is used when the noun is plural. I realise that "inaccuracies" is plural, but I used "is" because "problem" is singular. Can you tell me which noun in my sentence determines when "is" or "are" should be used?

Susan Fearn answers:

Firstly, Lachlan asks whether the sentence '**his biggest problem is his inaccuracies**' is right or wrong. He used it and one of his colleagues said it was wrong! The good news, Lachlan, is it's you who is right.

The main actor or **subject** of the sentence is '**his biggest problem**', and this is singular. So the verb in the sentence should agree with the subject. The second actor, the **object**, is the plural term '**his inaccuracies**', but the verb doesn't need to agree with this.

So it's all a question of agreement. In English, the normal word order is **subject, verb, object**.

My cat (**subject**) climbs (**verb**) trees (**object**)

The verb should agree with the **subject**, not the **object**. So **cat** and **climb** are agreeing – **my cat climbs**.

But even first language users of English sometimes have a problem when the sentence has more than one clause – and here's an example.

My sister, but not her friends, is coming to dinner.

We might be tempted to say **are coming to dinner**. But you don't have to because the verb should agree with **my sister**. The **not her friends** section is just additional information.

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