

# Functional Skills

## English

### Level 2 Writing W6c

Ensure Written Work is Fit for Purpose and Audience,  
with Accurate Grammar (Subject-Verb Agreement) v1.0

**Functional Skills English:**

Level 2

**Skill Standard:**

Writing W6c

**Coverage and Range:**

‘Ensure written work is fit for purpose and audience, with accurate... grammar.’<sup>1</sup>

‘Sentences should show correct use of tense and subject–verb agreement, including the correct use of agreements regarding pronouns and collective nouns.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Functional Skills Criteria for English, September 2011, Ofqual/11/4950

<sup>2</sup> QCA Functional Skills guidance: amplification of the standards June 2008 QCA/08/3700

## Agreement

Within a sentence a **complete subject** is all the words describing the person or thing which is *being* or *doing* something. A **verb**, meanwhile, is the state of being or the action taken:

**I** ran four miles today.

**The Missouri River**, the longest in North America, **snakes** through nine states and **flows** for more than 2,300 miles.

**The little black cat's green eyes**, a pair of giant emeralds, **stared** at me.

Around the corner **appeared** the **policeman**.

When the **subject** of a sentence matches its **verb(s)** in terms of their number, i.e. they are all singular or all plural, they are said to *agree*. Several correct examples are below:

Singular Subject	Singular Verbs	Remainder
I	speak	to my mum every day.
He	does	the washing up.
The box	is	too heavy to carry.
Derek's gran	was	eighty yesterday.

Plural Subject	Plural Verbs	Remainder
We	can afford	it.
They	do	the washing up.
Marcus and Lorna	were looking	for buried treasure.
The band members	are	on stage now.

## Verbs & Subjects

Clearly, as a native speaker, 99 per cent of the time you won't ever have to think about *agreement*, as you'd never consider writing or saying sentences such as, '*I will speaks to my mum,*' or, '*They thinks they is right.*' In the occasional complicated sentence, however, it can be trickier to make the correct choices.

In proofreading therefore, the best way to check a sentence is to:

1. identify the verbs;
2. check if they are singular or plural;
3. identify the complete subject;
4. and then finally check whether it agrees with the verb.

Whilst bearing in mind that the verb (and, of course, the subject) can involve more than one word, finding it is quite straight forward. This is because the verb is the *action* or *state of being* that the subject of the sentence is actually performing, e.g. *driving, breathing, singing, thinking, loving, stapling, being, having*, etc. To check you've found the verbs (and to lead you on to the subject), ask yourself *who* or *what* and then place the verbs next. If you've got them correct, the question you've framed will make sense.

Take the following sentence for example: ***The tiger roars in the jungle.***

1. In identifying the **verbs** we must ask ourselves: what action is being performed? In this case it is roars.
2. We then look at the verb itself. Roars is singular because you could say he/she/it roars.
3. Normally, but by no means exclusively, the **subject** of a sentence – in this case whatever is *roaring* – appears before the verb. Therefore, what roars? Clearly it is the tiger.
4. Lastly, we can now see that tiger is singular, as it would be *tigers* if it were plural. A singular **subject** hence agrees with a singular **verb** and the sentence is correct as a result.

Here's another: ***The bus stops are to be replaced.***

1. In identifying the **verbs** we must ask ourselves: what is being done? In this case some things are to be replaced.
2. We then look at the verbs in detail. Are to be replaced must refer to a plural subject because of the word are. If the subject were singular, *is* would have been used instead.
3. As before, we now need the **subject**. What are to be replaced? In this case the answer is *bus stops*.
4. Lastly, we can see that bus stops is plural, as if it were singular it would have been *bus stop*. A plural **subject** hence agrees with a plural set of **verbs** and the sentence is correct as a result.

Next: ***The folder full of documents was dropped onto the floor.***

1. What are the **verbs**, i.e. what's happening here? Something was dropped.
2. Was dropped must be singular, as it will only agree with a singular subject, e.g. *I, he, she* or *it*.
3. What is the **subject**, though, i.e. what was dropped? Here, you might at first glance think that the answer is documents, and that that's a plural. However, the **complete subject** reveals that a folder full of documents was dropped, of which there was only one.
4. Lastly, we can see that the **verbs** and the **subject** agree, i.e. they're all in the singular form, and the sentence is correct as a result.

Next: **There is a fly in my soup.**

1. What are the **verbs**, i.e. what's happening here? Something is.
2. Whatever is must be singular, otherwise the verb are would have been used instead.
3. So what's the **subject** then, i.e. what is? There's only one possible answer and that's the fly, as the sentence is telling us about it being in the soup. The unusual thing here is that the **subject** follows the **verb**.
4. Lastly, we can see that the **verb** and the **subject** agree, i.e. they're both in the singular form, and the sentence is correct as a result.

Whilst verbs also change depending on whether the sentence is referring to the past, present or future, they must **always** agree with the subject in terms of their number.

### Exercise 1

Underline the complete subject in each sentence and identify whether it is singular or plural.

1. My cat gave birth to six beautiful kittens last night. S / P
2. My cat's kittens are just lovely. S / P
3. My cat's smallest kitten is so cute. S / P
4. Mrs Greasley's thin, angular lips curled into a sneer. S / P
5. The eldest sons of Jim Gibson, the famed drummer, have started a band. S / P
6. The cook folded the flour carefully into the batter mixtures in the tins. S / P
7. From out of the mist, the ship's bow slowly began to appear. S / P
8. Around the rugged rock ran the ragged rascal. S / P

## Exercise 2

Underline all the verbs in the sentences below. The first one has been done for you.

1. Aunt Lucy looks at the clock, and, in the quiet of the early summer morning, tiptoes downstairs.
2. Jason went and bought himself a foot long sandwich with olives and gherkins.
3. The glass in the patio doors is smeared and streaked from the rain.
4. Each animal in the mule train bears a great weight on its back.
5. Harriet's Halloween parties are legendary.
6. My collection of vinyl LPs is my favourite possession.
7. Beyond the tree line I could clearly observe the gorillas.
8. I watched from the dock as the owl and the pussy cat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat.

## Complications

As ever with English, the more complex your sentences become, the more complex the subject-verb agreements can be. The basic *rules* are below.

1. When the subject and its verbs are separated by other phrases and clauses, they still need to agree with one another:

*The referee, after consulting with both of the touch judges, **has decided to award** a penalty to the home team.*

2. When you have separate singular and plural subjects in the same sentence, they each need agreeable verbs:

*The judges **are conferring to decide** which boxer **is** the winner.*

*Russ **is going to drive**, whereas Sandy and Ronny **are going** by train.*

*I am going to a barbecue that my neighbours **are hosting**.*

3. When there are multiple singular subjects joined by *either*, *or*, *neither* or *nor*, a singular verb should be used as they are still being referred to individually:

*Either the dog or the cat* **is clawing** the furniture.

*Neither of my nieces* **is going** to the party.

*My dad or my mum* **is able** to pick us up.

Note that when referring to another singular subject in this way alongside yourself, i.e. using the word *I*, the standard convention is to put yourself last:

*Neither he nor I* **am ordering** anything.

Depending on the time of day, *either Madeline or I* **am** in charge.

Equally, pronouns starting with *any*, *every*, *no* or *some* are all singular subjects:

*Somebody* **is** responsible even though *no one* **is** owning up. *Nothing* **is** left of the chocolate cake, and *anything* **is** possible now that it has gone.

By contrast, pronouns such as *all*, *some* and *none* can be either singular or plural depending on the context:

- *All* of the food **is** left.
- *All* of the cakes **are** left.
- *All* of the money **is** gone.
- *All* of the keys **are** missing.
  
- *Some* of the food **is** left.
- *Some* of the cakes **are** left.
- *Some* of the money **is** gone.
- *Some* of the keys **are** missing.
  
- *None* of the food **is** left. (Here, *none* is referring to *not one*.)
- *None* of the cakes **are** left. (Here, *none* is referring to *not any*.)
- *None* of the money **is** gone. (Here, *none* is referring to *not one*.)
- *None* of the keys **are** gone. (Here, *none* is referring to *not any*.)

**Note:** You must be careful when choosing a verb to accompany such pronouns.

4. When singular and plural subjects are joined by *either*, *or*, *neither* or *nor*, put the plural last and make the verb agree with it:

*Maria or the Williams sisters* **are** likely to win this tournament.

*Either that pig or those cows* **are** my favourite animals.

5. When multiple subjects (singular or plural) are joined by *and*, use a plural verb:

A desktop and two laptops **are** my main tools at work.

Larry, Moe and Curly **are** better known as *The Three Stooges*.

The children and I **are** going to meet you at the airport.

An exception to this is when you are referring to compound nouns which are formed by two separate words joined by *and*. Don't be confused into treating these as plurals as they are not. Such examples are singular, and as such require a singular verb:

Fish and chips **is** my favourite meal.

Cheese and pickle **is** my favourite sandwich filling.

My parents' bed and breakfast **is** highly rated.

6. Also be careful when using a subject followed by the words *accompanied by*, *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, *not* or *together with*. In such sentences the additional extra information does not alter the fact that the subject is the first person or thing mentioned, and that the verb must agree with it and it alone:

Jeremiah, as well as Kirsten, **is** to lead the parade. **(Singular)**

The crocodile, along with the snakes, **is** now ready to be fed. **(Singular)**

The seven unruly Watson children, not I, **are** going to the park. **(Plural)**

The club members, together with the chairman, **are** in agreement. **(Plural)**

7. Expressions of time, money and weight are considered singularly when they act as one unit:

Two hundred pounds **is** a lot to pay for a pair of shoes.

Three stone **is** what she has to lose before she meets her target weight.

I don't think that thirty minutes **is** long enough for a lunch break.

8. *Collective nouns* are words that refer to a group of people or animals as a group, e.g. *audience*, *crowd*, *queue*, *herd*, *committee*, etc. In terms of subject-verb agreement they are a minefield, as although they refer to a *single* group, the group itself is made of *multiple* individuals. Should the agreeing verb therefore be *singular* or *plural*?

There are several suggested methods of trying to work out which verb form to use – none

of which are truly satisfactory – and only a few words that definitively take just one form (e.g. *people* and *cattle* are always plural, as are all adjectives that are used as collective nouns, e.g. *the rich*, *the poor*, etc.) In general it is recommended that collectives be treated as singular, but even authorities such as the Oxford English Dictionary state that for almost all such words there are contexts in which they can be treated as *either* singular or plural.

Consequently, for students, the least worst options are:

- to use whatever verb form sounds best to you for any given sentence;
- to adapt or replace the collective noun with a simpler word or phrase, e.g. *worshippers* (plural) instead of *congregation*;
- or, if you are ever truly stumped for a choice, refer to a dictionary for advice.

A few examples below illustrate some of the uncertainties that can arise:

1. *The league's leading team is/are about to play a game against its/their bitterest opponents.* (Whilst *is* and *its* might feel grammatically more correct – there is only one team after all – *are* and *their* are undoubtedly used far more often. This is still the case despite the fact that there is an obvious singular emphasis, i.e. there can be only one team leading the league.)

2. *The audience is/are applauding.* (Again, in common usage you are more likely to hear *are* used rather than *is*, even though the latter is more audibly and grammatically correct. One workaround would be to replace *audience* with *people in the audience*, as this agrees only with *are*.)

3. *The jury in the crown court trial was/were deadlocked.* (In this case there's only one jury, but either words sounds OK. As above, one solution might be to replace the collective noun with a simple plural, as this resolves the situation completely: *The jurors in the crown court trial were deadlocked.*)

4. *The swarm is behind that tree.* (This is one example in which a plural verb (*are*) would be inappropriate.)

5. *The police have caught the culprit.* (This is one example in which a singular verb (*has*) would be inappropriate.)

### Exercise 3

Referring to the previous information where necessary, read the following sentences and choose the correct verb from the options available.

1. Here **is/are** the notes that you asked me to fetch.
2. The arrival of the internet and email **make/makes** communication with my family so much easier.
3. The salmon **was/were** leaping up the waterways of British Columbia towards their spawning grounds.
4. A load of four tonnes of sand **was/were** needed for the job.
5. Rex barks when he's angry, which **is/are** mainly when the postmen **arrive/arrives**.
6. Fifteen minutes **was/were** all it took to crack open the safe.
7. There **is/are** the women that I **was/were** talking about.
8. The jury's decision **has/have** to be unanimous.
9. A lot of the Christmas cake **is/are** gone.
10. Lots of the mince pies **has/have** been eaten.
11. Each day in my job **is/are** the same. It's so dull!
12. All of the beef burgers **has/have** defrosted.
13. A meal and drinks **is/are** waiting for you in your room.
14. The Marianas Trench and Mount Everest **is/are** respectively the lowest and highest points on Earth.
15. The Christmas Island Frigatebird **was/were** much more numerous in the past.
16. Cycling and juggling at the same time **is/are** difficult.
17. We **is/are** going to go to a restaurant today after work.
18. The deer **was/were** stampeding across their forest reserve.

**Exercise 4**

Referring to the previous information when necessary, proofread the following sentences and insert the correct verbs in the spaces provided.

1. The cats, which \_\_\_\_\_ on the hot tin roof, jumped off onto the cooler glass of the greenhouse.
2. The colours of the British flag \_\_\_\_\_ red, white and blue.
3. Here \_\_\_\_\_ the towels I bought for you.
4. There \_\_\_\_\_ the lesser spotted owl – on that branch!
5. Will all those who \_\_\_\_\_ playing in the tournament please make their way to the pitches?
6. Date and walnut \_\_\_\_\_ my favourite kind of cake.
7. No running or diving \_\_\_\_\_ permitted by the pool.
8. Ten litres of juice \_\_\_\_\_ needed for the party.
9. I don't think either United or City \_\_\_\_\_ going to win the league this year.
10. Nobody \_\_\_\_\_ listening to me!
11. I don't believe you, Mr Stirland, and neither \_\_\_\_\_ the judges.
12. Both the brothers \_\_\_\_\_ ecstatic after their gold and bronze medal-winning performances.
13. Kicking the balls towards the greenhouse \_\_\_\_\_ not clever.
14. The reindeer \_\_\_\_\_ all gathered together in a giant herd.
15. Robin Hood, like King Arthur, \_\_\_\_\_ one of England's best-loved heroes.

**Exercise 5**

Proofread the following sentences and correct any subject-verb disagreements.

- 1) Bubble and squeak are not a dish I am overly fond of.
- 2) Half of my working day were taken up with stupid emails!
- 3) Either the plans or my measurements is totally wrong!
- 4) The *Lord of the Rings* is one of the best books I have ever read.
- 5) The stories in the book, authored solely by me, captures what it means to live within the Arctic Circle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 6) Neither of the new analysts, Alice or Bob, have cracked the secret code yet.
- 7) At the turn of the twentieth century, a fifth of people was employed as domestic staff.
- 8) Whenever they shoots at the goal they scores! Our defensive players are awful.
- 9) The fungi that the scientist picked in the forest was delicious!
- 10) Anders Rasmussen, together with his teammates Olof Anderson and Marcus Nordahl, are a hot medal favourite at the next winter Olympics.
- 11) This new TV series run twice a week for six weeks.
- 12) A quarter of the parents surveyed is helping their children with house deposits.

**Exercise 6**

Create two of your own sentences for each section below and ensure that the subjects and verbs are in agreement. Have your tutor check them when you are finished.

1. When the subject and its verbs are separated by other phrases and clauses, they still need to agree with one another:

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2. When you have separate singular and plural subjects in the same sentence:

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3. When there are multiple singular subjects joined by *either*, *or*, *neither* or *nor*.

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4. When referring to another singular subject alongside yourself:

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5. When using pronouns starting with *any*, *every*, *no* or *some*:

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6. When singular and plural subjects are joined by *either*, *or*, *neither* or *nor*.

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7. When multiple subjects (singular or plural) are joined by *and*:

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8. When using compound nouns which are formed by two separate words joined by *and*:

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9. When using a subject followed by the words *accompanied by*, *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, *not* or *together with*:

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10. When using expressions of time, money and weight

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11. When using collective nouns:

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## Exercise 7

Review the following article and correct any incorrect **verbs**.



### **My Big Splash with Moby-Dick (or rename to HAVING A WHALE OF A TIME]**

Trincomalee sits on the east coast of Sri Lanka, a colonial outpost of what was British Ceylon. I were headed 20 nautical miles out from its beaches, where it's a mile straight down into the sun-dappled big blue. Let's be clear: it is a rare experience to come face to face with something with a head the size of a lorry, like Optimus Prime in cetaceous form. It's rare because who on earth gets in the water to study something that weighs the same as 30 elephants, are the length of five buses and, if it was so inclined, could just open its mouth and scoop you into its belly, consigning you to the same fate as Jonah or Pinocchio and his dad? Call me Ishmael, but these beasts have form.

Should you want to cast aside those warnings from literature, and commune with whales both sperm and blue, then Trincomalee should be your first port of call. At certain times of the year it's home to "superpods" of sperm whales, entire families bringing their calves to the surface to show them what humans look like when they're trying to stay afloat in the open ocean.

*Cinnamon Nature Trails*, a local company, have the only conservation licence that will let you see these creatures up close, and the rule are strict but simple: you is there for study and research alone, and you is only allowed in the water on this basis. You are on — or rather in — the whales' home surf and, as they will be curious, no more than two people should be in the water with them at any one time. Ever.