

Subject/Verb Pairs & Punctuation

Subject-and-verb pairs are the essential skeletons on which we build sentences. Every sentence must have at least one pair, and many sentences have more. Recognizing subject-verb pairs in your writing can help you avoid errors and express your ideas more clearly and effectively:

- Avoid sentence fragments.
- Avoid run-on sentences.
- Know where to place commas and semicolons.
- Avoid monotonous or choppy writing.

Subject-verb pairs & clauses

A word group with a subject-verb pair is a *clause*. The subject and verb have to match and make sense together. The complete verb includes any helpers (modals) or auxiliary verbs that help it make sense in that sentence, for example *may, might, must, can, will, have, has, had, is, are, am, or been*.

Subject-verb pairs & simple sentences

A sentence can express a single complete thought with a single subject-verb pair:

Children are naturally curious.

A simple sentence can also express a single complete thought with compound subjects (subject-subject-verb), compound verbs (subject-verb-verb) or both:

Puppies and kittens are naturally curious.

Children explore their environments and test their limits.

Children and their caregivers can enjoy play time and learn new things together.

Subject-verb pairs in independent & dependent clauses

Clauses like those above that express complete thoughts are called *independent* (they can stand on their own). You may choose to join independent clauses; you may use either a *comma-FANBOYS* or a *semicolon*:

Puppies and kittens are naturally curious, so you must watch them closely.

Children explore their environments and test their limits; learning comes naturally to them.

Other subject-verb pairs create clauses that are *dependent* (they must lean on an independent thought and cannot stand on their own). The following clauses have subject-verb pairs but nevertheless are not complete thoughts:

Since puppies and kittens are naturally curious

When children explore their environments

Because children and their caregivers enjoy play time together

Quite a few words like *since, when, and because* make a thought incomplete even if it has a subject-verb pair. Others include *if, though, although, even though, so that, while, who, and which*. If you have a clause that starts with one of these words, you must be sure you connect it to an independent clause.

Punctuation for joining complete thoughts

The subject-verb pairs in your writing are important clues for punctuation:

- A *period* may follow a single complete thought, but it may not follow an incomplete thought.
- A *semicolon* may join two complete thoughts but it may not join incomplete thoughts.
- A *comma-and* (or any *comma-FANBOYS*) may join two complete thoughts.
- You may not join two complete thoughts with a *comma*.
- You don't need a *comma* with a compound subject or a compound verb (unless there are three or more—in other words, a list, but that is a different punctuation rule).

Punctuation for joining incomplete with complete thoughts

You must combine incomplete with complete thoughts (in other words, dependent with independent clauses). In that case, you separate the incomplete from the complete. This is an important comma rule:

Since puppies and kittens are naturally curious, you must watch them closely.

When children explore their environments, they learn in a natural way.

Because children and caregivers enjoy play time together, it becomes a bonding experience.

(However, if you reverse the order of these clauses to start with the complete thought, you do not use the comma between them: *Children learn in a natural way when they explore their environments.*)

Sentence variety

One way to make writing “flow” is to use a variety of sentence lengths and types:

Simple sentence: one complete thought, one subject-verb pair:

Children love to explore.

Simple sentence: one complete thought, one subject-verb pair (compound verb):

Children will touch and taste everything.

Compound sentence: two complete thoughts, two separate subject-verb pairs:

Children love to explore; they are never bored.

Children love to explore, so they are never bored.

Complex sentence: one complete and one incomplete thought, two separate subject-verb pairs:

Because they love to explore, children are never bored.

Children are never bored because they love to explore.

Compound-complex sentence: two complete and one incomplete thought, three separate subject-verb pairs:

Children are never bored because they love to explore; they will touch and taste everything.

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