Subject-Verb Agreement

A subject and a predicate are included in every *correctly* written sentence; there is never one without the other. Now, you may think to yourself that the first independent clause on this page doesn't sound “correctly written.” You may think that the following revision sounds much more “correct”—“A subject and a predicate is included in every *correctly* written sentence.” Now let’s test the correctness of that revision by answering a few questions:

-Does the verb reflect the subject *in number*? In other words, are both the subject and the verb singular or plural?

The subject of the revised 1st independent clause is *plural*—“A subject and a predicate.” However, the verb of the revised 1st independent clause is *singular*—“is.”

The 1st independent clause in its original form—“A subject and a predicate are included in every *correctly* written sentence”—is correctly written, because the subject and the verb agree in number.

Now let’s take a look at this sentence:

-“Clarence, on behalf of his coworkers, *say* that the recent scheduling changes are unfair.”

If the noun “coworkers” was the real subject of the sentence, then it would be correct to use the verb “say,” since both terms agree in number and person. (The noun “coworkers” is a 3rd person plural noun; the verb “say,” when used with a 3rd person plural noun, becomes a 3rd person plural verb—“Coworkers *say* that the recent scheduling changes are unfair.”)

*NOTE: The verb “say” can also be a 2nd person singular verb, as in “*You say* that the recent scheduling changes are unfair.”*
However, the real subject of the sentence is the noun “Clarence,” and “Clarence” is a 3rd person *singular* noun. The only verb that can agree with a 3rd person singular noun like “Clarence” is a 3rd person singular verb like “says”:

-“Clarence, on behalf of his coworkers, *says* that the recent scheduling changes are unfair.”

The subject, then, must not only agree with the verb *in number* but also *in person*. If the subject and the verb do not agree *in number* or *in person*, then the resulting error is a **Subject-Verb Agreement Error**. Let’s look over the following sentences for any subject-verb agreement errors:

-“A stack of books *were* left unread on the student’s desk.”
  -The verb is “were,” but what’s the subject of this sentence? “Books” or “stack?” The subject is “stack,” as in “a *stack* of books. Since “stack” is singular, the verb must be singular, as well:
  -“A *stack* of books *was* left unread on the student’s desk.”

-“There’s two pulled-pork sandwiches and a slice of pizza in the refrigerator.”
  -The meaning behind the contraction “There’s” is “There *is*.” Notice how the verb “is” comes before the *real* subject “two pulled-pork sandwiches and a slice of pizza”? Also notice how the *real* subject is *plural* but the verb is *singular*? Therefore, the sentence should be revised as follows:
  -“There *are* two pulled-pork sandwiches and a slice of pizza in the refrigerator.”

*NOTE: The pronoun “There” may act as the subject of the sentence, but remember that pronouns always refer to something; in this case, the pronoun “there” refers to “two-pulled pork sandwiches and a slice of pizza.” Therefore, the *real* subject is “two-pulled pork sandwiches and a slice of pizza.”

-“Neither the students nor the professor *have* the time for a good night’s sleep.”
This sentence features a compound subject ("students" and "professor") that is joined by the correlative conjunction neither-nor. ("Neither the students nor the professor") In cases like these, the verb must agree with the subject closest to it. Since the 3rd person plural verb "have" does not agree with the 3rd person singular subject "professor," the sentence should be revised as follows:

-"Neither the students nor the professor has the time for a good night’s sleep."

A subject must always agree with the verb in person and in number.