

Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful
Mini Lesson #2
Subject – Verb Combinations: They Need Each Other

The **purpose** of this lesson is to examine the importance of the **Subject-Verb Combination** in English Grammar.

The words **SUBJECT** and **VERB** are fundamental to English grammar. They are presented as grammatical terms in nearly every book of English grammar. In this lesson, we will explore why the two terms need to be considered together.

Taken separately, a **SUBJECT** usually refers to a noun with supporting words or a pronoun that stands for the noun. Subjects can be singular or plural. They can be specific, collective or generic. They can be proper or common. A **VERB** usually refers to an action or a state of being. It can be a single word or a group of words. The words can be in various forms.

Together the **SUBJECT** and **VERB** form a unit, and the unit becomes the basis of nearly every English sentence. With and only with a **subject-verb combination**, the verb has **TENSE**. The tense provides information about the time of the **subject-verb combination**. In English every sentence must have a **subject-verb combination**, and every **subject-verb combination** must have a **tense**. When verbs are used without a subject, there is no tense. This is illustrated in the following four examples:

1. The **students are walking** to school.
2. It started to snow while the **students were walking** to school.
3. While **walking** to school, the **students** met their friends.
4. The **students** always enjoy **walking** to school

All four sentences have the words ‘students’ and ‘walking’. Notice that in sentences 1 and 2 these words form **subject-verb combinations**. In these sentences, the verb **walking** is used in the present continuing and past continuing tenses respectively. ‘Students’ and ‘walking’ do not form subject-verb combinations in sentences 3 and 4. In sentence 3 the **subject-verb combination** is ‘students met’, and in sentence 4 the **subject-verb combination** is ‘students enjoy’. Sentence 3 is in past tense and sentence 4 is in present tense. But notice ‘walking’ in sentences 3 and 4. It is part of a phrase in these sentences, not part of a subject-verb combination. Therefore, ‘walking’ in these sentences has no tense. If you change the tenses of sentences 3 and 4, the form of ‘walking’ will not change.

Several aspects of English grammar are determined by the **subject-verb combination**.

First: **Subject-verb agreement** is a very significant aspect of English grammar. Singular subjects and plural subjects often require different verb forms to achieve agreement. Often agreement is established by a helping verb rather than by the main verb. **Subject verb agreement** is demonstrated in these sentences.

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| 5. She walks to school | They walk to school. |
| 6. She is walking to school. | They are walking to school. |
| 7. She has walked to school. | They have walked to school. |
| 8. She was walking to school | They were walking to school. |

Second: Subject-verb relationships differentiate **active voice** expressions from **passive voice** expressions. When the subject is the **DOER** of the action of the verb, the sentence is **active voice**. When the subject is the **RECEIVER** of the action of the verb, the sentence is **passive voice**. This is demonstrated in sentences 9 through 11. Active voice sentences are in the left column, and passive voice sentences are in the right column. The **subject-verb combinations** in these sentences are in bold.

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| 9. He sent the letter. | The letter was sent. |
| 10. He served the meal. | The meal was served. |
| 11. He read the announcement. | The announcement was read. |

Third: Groups of words with **subjects-verb combinations** are called **clauses**. Groups of words without **subject-verb combinations** are called **phrases**. The distinction between clauses and phrases is demonstrated in sentences 12 through 15. The word groups on the left are **clauses**, and those on the right are **phrases**. The **subject-verb combinations** in the clauses are in bold.

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| 12. After we left the party..... | After leaving the party... |
| 13. Although we left early..... | In spite of leaving early... |
| 14.the man who drove home. |the man driving home. |
| 15. Because they were late, they... | By being late, they..... |

In summary, **subject-verb combinations** are required in all English sentences. **Tense** is required with all subject-verb combinations. In many cases of subject-verb combinations, **agreement** between the subject and verb is required. The use of **active or passive voice** is determined by the nature of the relationship between the subject and the verb in subject verb combinations. **Clauses** are word groups that have **subject-verb combinations**; **phrases** are word groups that do not have **subject-verb combinations**.