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Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is tested all over the ACT English section. Consider the following sentences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Despite a national campaign to encourage conservation, there is many Americans who have not accepted recycling as a way of life.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High above the Cuyahoga River rises the gleaming skyscrapers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our local congressman, a competent representative of both community and statewide interests, are among the most respected persons on the committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The collection of paintings entitled “Modern Fossils” are one of the most widely traveled exhibits this year.</td>
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These sentences should read:

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<th>Despite a national campaign to encourage conservation, there are many Americans who have not accepted recycling as a way of life.</th>
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<td>The collection of paintings entitled “Modern Fossils” is one of the most widely traveled exhibits this year.</td>
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</tbody>
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Not sure why? Be sure to review the following subject-verb agreement rules.

1. On the ACT, any time you see a verb underlined, match it up to its subject. Singular verbs must accompany singular subjects, and plural verbs must accompany plural subjects.

   **TIP** Remember that any form of ‘to be’ is a verb. So *is, are, have been, being, was, were*—all verbs that need to match their subjects.

   **Examples:**
   
   **Correct:** *Abe, unlike his friends, is not going to prom.*
Incorrect: Abe, unlike his friends, are not going to prom.

2. On the ACT, sometimes the verb and subject are close to each other and easy to match up:

Many high-ranking colleges are on the East Coast.

More often, however, the ACT folks make it difficult to find the subject that connects to a verb. Watch out for this common trap:

High above the Cuyahoga river rises the gleaming skyscrapers.

A. NO CHANGE  
B. rise  
C. has risen  
D. has rosen

Sure, a singular river rises, but what’s rising here? The skyscrapers, right? And more than one skyscrapers rise. Therefore, the correct answer choice is B.

3. Most common on the ACT is total separation of the subject and verb. When you see a verb underlined, you will have to look far back in the sentence to find the subject.

Incorrect: Matt, along with his friends, are going to a Superbowl party. 
Correct: Matt, along with his friends, is going to a Superbowl party.

Incorrect: The use of cellular phones and pagers are prohibited in this building.
Correct: The use of cellular phones and pagers is prohibited in this building.

Tricky, right?

One more tip: when you’re thinking about what’s plural and what’s singular, remember that a group, committee, class, collection, institution—all singular.

Incorrect: The collection of prom dresses are going to be displayed at the Mall of America tomorrow. 
Correct: The collection of prom dresses is going to be displayed at the Mall of America tomorrow.

Incorrect: The snow-covered chain of mountains are beautiful in the winter. 
Correct: The snow-covered chain of mountains is beautiful in the winter.
Pronoun-noun agreement

Pronoun-noun agreement is another major topic in the ACT English section. Consider the following sentences:

- The typical college student has difficulty adjusting to academic standards much higher than those of their school.
- A typical bank will reject an application for a loan if their credit department discovers that the applicant is unemployed.
- The IRS is annually derided by critics who claim that their instruction manuals for filing taxes are too complicated.
- If someone loses his way in the airport, they can ask any employee for directions.

These sentences should read:

- The typical college student has difficulty adjusting to academic standards much higher than those of his or her school.
- A typical bank will reject an application for a loan if its credit department discovers that the applicant is unemployed.
- The IRS is annually derided by critics who claim that its instruction manuals for filing taxes are too complicated.
- If someone loses his way in the airport, he or she can ask any employee for directions.

Not sure why? See the pronoun agreement review below.

1. When you see a pronoun (ex. his, her, their, its, he, she), make sure it agrees with the noun it refers to. Singular nouns need singular pronouns. Plural nouns need plural pronouns.

   - Doug went dumpster diving in an attempt to find his lost retainer.
   - The athletes accidentally left their equipment in an airport bathroom.
2. Remember that someone, everyone, or everybody (or any of those other singular-but-plural-sounding words mentioned in the subject-verb agreement section, like group, company, etc.) need a singular pronoun. Let’s look at a common mistake people make with pronoun-noun agreement:

Incorrect: Someone lost their shoe on senior ditch day.
Correct: Someone lost his or her shoe on senior ditch day.

Incorrect: The group did not reserve their table on time.
Correct: The group did not reserve its table on time.

TIP Although it is tested infrequently on the ACT, remember that pronouns also need to agree with other pronouns in a sentence. In particular, never switch from ‘one’ to ‘you’ in a sentence.

Examples:
Correct: One should never exercise before he or she goes to bed.
Incorrect: One should never exercise before you go to bed.

Ambiguous Pronouns

Once in a while, the ACT will test ambiguous pronoun usage. Consider the following sentences:

The manager told the employee he was lazy.
When you are painting the siding, make sure not to get it on the grass.

The sentences need to be reorganized so that the pronoun is no longer ambiguous. Who is lazy, the manager or the employee? What needs to stay off the grass? Watch out for ambiguous pronoun usage! Better sentences:

The employee was lazy, and the manager told him so.
When you are painting the siding, make sure not to get the paint on the grass.

Some ambiguous pronoun tips:

1. Whenever you write a pronoun—he, she, him, his, her, its, they, that, which, etc.—be sure there is absolutely no doubt as to what noun the pronoun refers to.

2. Avoid using this, that, it, or which to refer to a whole phrase, sentence, or idea.
Incorrect: For the last several months, Marge has adamantly refused to clean her room. This is what ultimately caused the stench on the second floor.
Correct: For the last several months, Marge has adamantly refused to clean her room. Her ever-growing mess is what ultimately caused the stench on the second floor.

Relative Pronoun Usage

The term ‘relative pronouns’ refers to four pronouns—who, whom, that, or which. The ACT will usually throw in a question or two testing these pronouns.

Correct the following sentences:

Those people, who I have called repeatedly, never returned my call.
His daughter wants the same haircut which Clara has.

These sentences should read:

Those people, whom I have called repeatedly, never returned my call.
His daughter wants the same haircut that Clara has.

Rusty? Here are the rules:

1. To decide whether or not to use who or whom, turn the clause into a question: who have I been calling? I have been calling them. If you use her, him, them, or us to answer the question, the appropriate relative pronoun is whom. If you use she, he, they, or we to answer the question, the appropriate relative pronoun is who.

2. That and which should not be used interchangeably. As a rule, use which if the relative clause (the clause containing the relative pronoun) is set off by commas. Use that if the clause containing the relative pronoun is not set off by commas.

Incorrect: The documentary, that was released last May, won an award at the festival.
Correct: The documentary, which was released last May, won an award at the festival.

Pronoun in the Wrong Case

On the ACT, there may be a question or two testing that you are using the correct version of a pronoun. Consider the following sentences:
Him and his friends went to the dance last night.
Clarence and me joined our cousins at the Memorial Day barbeque.
Our teacher forgot to distribute new textbooks to my girlfriend and I.

These sentences should read:

He and his friends went to the dance last night.
Clarence and I joined our cousins at the Memorial Day barbeque.
Our teacher forgot to distribute new textbooks to my girlfriend and me.

Not sure why? Read on.

1. To identify a pronoun in the wrong case, isolate the pronoun you are concerned with and drop the other pronoun. Then read the sentence again. Let’s do this with the two examples above:

Him went to the dance last night.
Me joined our cousins at the Memorial Day barbeque.
Our teacher forgot to distribute new textbooks to I.

Those sentences sound horribly wrong, don’t they? Use this technique to ferret out incorrect pronoun case on the ACT.

**Verb Tenses**

Keep an eye out for verb tense questions on the ACT. Consider the following sentence:

Many gymnasts participate in professional competitions at an alarmingly early age, but because of their lack of physical stamina, suffer multiple injuries early in their careers.

The sentence should read:

Many gymnasts participate in professional competitions at an alarmingly early age, but because of their lack of physical stamina, **suffer** multiple injuries early in their careers.

Not sure why? Here are some tense error tips

1. Keep an eye out to make sure that underlined verbs are in the same tense as the rest of the passage. There will always be time-descriptive clues in the sentence to clue you in as to the verb’s proper tense. Are the events of the passage occurring in the present or in the past?
2. If there are two verbs presented in the same sentence, be sure that there is a logical time relationship between the two verbs. In the above example about dancers, there are two verbs—‘participate’ and ‘suffered.’ Since one is present-tense and the other is past tense, the sentence is incorrect. (See the corrections above).