

UNIT 1: THE SUBJECT

The Subject is one of those features of English grammar which have proved both easy and difficult for Chinese learners – easy because there seems to be something similar to the concept of ‘subject’ in Chinese, and difficult because the ‘subject’ does not work in quite the same way in Chinese as in English, and most of the mistakes made by Chinese learners of English with respect to the subject may be traced to these differences. So it would be worth your while to pay particular attention to it.

In Unit 1 we discussed the main features of subject-verb agreement. To avoid making the overall picture too complicated, we’ve left out special cases of subject-verb agreement and put them in this section. You may want to read about them at your leisure.

SOME SPECIAL CASES

1. SUBJECTS THAT FOLLOW VERBS

Though the subject normally precedes the verb, there are cases where they follow the verb instead (especially if the sentence begins with ‘there is/are’). Even in these cases, the verb still has to agree with the subject, e.g.:

*On the floor **was** a dead **body**.*
*On the floor **were** several dead **bodies**.*

*There **is** a doctor on the plane.*
*There **are** surprisingly few **people** at the concert.*

QUESTION 13:

Fill in the blanks with a verb in the correct form, paying special attention to subject-verb agreement:

1. There _____ many people who would just keep quiet about it.
2. There _____ a quality which is universally admired in all cultures.
3. In the middle of the square _____ a statue of the great leader.
4. On the shelf _____ many books on music.

2. COLLECTIVE NOUNS

A **collective noun** refers to a group of people or things which forms some sort of unit, for example:

army	audience	class	committee	couple
crew	family	flock	government	herd
navy	orchestra	public	staff	team

When a collective noun is used to refer to the group as a whole, it normally takes a singular verb, e.g.:

*The **audience** is waiting.*

The **team** was badly beaten.
The **class** seems very quiet this morning.

However, when a collective noun refers to the group as a number of individuals, a plural verb is normally preferred. For example:

The **audience** are stamping their feet.
[Would you find 'The audience is stamping its feet' somewhat strange? Why?]
The **team** were very upset by their defeat.
The **class** never discuss their personal problems with the teacher.

QUESTION 14:

In the following sentences, a collective noun is used twice. In one case, it is more appropriate to treat it as singular, and in the other case, as plural. Decide which is more appropriate in each case, and fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb provided:

1. The committee _____ (have) unanimously passed the motion.
2. The committee _____ (be) very upset by the bad publicity.
3. His family _____ (have) not spoken to him for years.
4. His family _____ (be) the most important thing in his life.
5. The public _____ (be) showing strong support for the new president.
6. Though the public _____ (have) different opinions on the issue, efforts are still being made to reach a consensus.

3. ADJECTIVES AS SUBJECTS

Noun phrases can be formed from a small number of adjectives (preceded by the definite article), especially those describing people, such as *the young*, *the rich*, and *the homeless*. They can serve as subjects, and they always take plural verbs.

The young want to grow up fast and the old wish to grow younger.
Is it true that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer?

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1:

The subjects are:

1. Singapore is the smallest republic in the world.
2. The smallest republic in the world is Singapore.

QUESTION 2:

One possible answer: The subject occurs at the beginning of the sentence.

QUESTION 3:

The subject immediately precedes the verb.

QUESTION 4:

The subject controls the form of the verb [or: The verb agrees in form with the subject] in 'number' (singular/plural).

QUESTION 5:

The subject and the auxiliary verb change positions in a question [or: in an ‘interrogative’ sentence]

QUESTION 6:

Dictionaries are full of words, and words are common property. This sentence itself is made up of words which can all be found in any English dictionary -- and yet the sentence is not common property. This is because words are not used in isolation, but are put together by the writer, and the resulting phrases and sentences are products of his mind. An idea may be quite commonplace: for example, the first sentence in this paragraph contains a perfectly common idea, which most of you will have thought of at one time or another. Yet the way the idea is expressed is entirely my own, and it is possible that no-one else has written exactly the same sentence before.

QUESTION 7:

(Here are the subjects originally used by the writer of this text. Other answers may also be acceptable.)

What is science? The word is usually used to mean one of three things, or a mixture of them. I do not think we need to be precise – it is not always a good idea to be too precise. Science means, sometimes, a special method of finding things out. Sometimes it means the body of knowledge arising from the things found out. It may also mean the new things you (or we) can do when you (or we) have found something out, or the actual doing of new things.

QUESTION 8:

There’s a separate topic and subject in some of the sentences, and they both refer to the same thing. Therefore one of them is redundant. Correct answer:

1. Graph 1 shows that the standard of living in Hong Kong is rising.
2. The findings reveal that this approach is not working too well. [OR: According to the findings, this approach is not working too well.]
3. This loudspeaker was bought 20 years ago, but still worked perfectly.
4. Some people in the crowd turned around and listened to their leader.

QUESTION 9:

Wrong sentences are indicated by an asterisk *:

1. *He tried lifting the weight but was too heavy.
2. He tried lifting the weight but was too exhausted.
3. *He couldn’t lift the weight as was too heavy.
4. *He couldn’t lift the weight as was too exhausted.
5. She greeted us and sat down.
6. *She greeted us before sat down.
7. *He checked his pocket and was full of coins.
8. He checked his pocket and took out the coins.

EXPLANATION: When a sentence is joined (by a conjunction *and/but*) to another sentence, the subject of the second sentence can be left out if it is identical to that of the first. E.g. in sentence 2: 'He tried lifting the weight but (he) was too exhausted'. But not in sentence 1: 'He tried lifting the weight but *(it) was too heavy'. In sentence 4, the second half – 'as (he) was too exhausted' – is not a sentence in its own right (i.e. it is not an 'independent clause').

QUESTION 10:

From the given data, it seems that, if the subject is singular, the verb should be in the 'singular' form (with a suffix *-s* added), and if the subject is plural, the verb should be in the 'plural' form (with no suffix added).

QUESTION 11:

These additional data show that the hypothesis made under Question 4 is true only for verbs in the **present tense**. In other words, generally speaking, subject-verb agreement applies *only* in the present tense. [NOTE: There is one verb in English – the verb *be* -- which obeys its own laws when it comes to agreement. Luckily, it is the only verb that behaves this way, so it's a simple matter of learning a few special forms:

I was, we/you/they were, he/she/it was
The student is/was, the students are/were

QUESTION 12:

1. My friends visit me very often.
2. My best friend lives in the next block.
3. One of my friends is a disc jockey.
4. Most of our teachers prefer to teach in Chinese.
5. He spends most of his money on CDs.
6. He and his wife spend most of their money on CDs.
7. Many of the soldiers have deserted.
8. One of the soldiers is staying behind.
9. Each of these books costs more than \$200.
10. Few of these books cost less than \$250.
11. Most of the money has been lost.
12. Most of the furniture has been stolen.
13. Most of the students have signed up.

QUESTION 13:

5. There are many people who would just keep quiet about it.
6. There is a quality which is universally admired in all cultures.
7. In the middle of the square stands a statue of the great leader.
8. On the shelf are many books on music.

QUESTION 14:

The preferred answers are:

1. The committee has unanimously passed the motion.
2. The committee are very upset by the bad publicity.
3. His family have not spoken to him for years.
4. His family is the most important thing in his life.
5. The public is showing strong support for the new president.
6. Though the public have different opinions on the issue, efforts are still being made to reach a consensus.

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES:

Just for interest, here are the original texts from which these exercises are constructed. You need not, of course, come up with exactly the same words, as long as your words make sense in context and observe subject-verb agreement:

EXERCISE 1

TEXT 1:

Four men were attacked by a group of masked men wielding knives at Shamshuipo early on Thursday.

Around 12.39am, a 55-year-old man, surnamed Hui, and his 40-year-old friend, surnamed Lam, were talking on the corner of Shek Kip Mei Street and Fuk Wa Street.

"Suddenly four masked men jumped out of a private car and started attacking the victims," a police spokeswoman said.

She added: "After chopping them repeatedly, the suspects fled in the private car on Boundary Road towards Kowloon City."

The victims were taken to Caritas Hospital for treatment.

Police said the victims did not know the men and had no idea why they were attacked.

TEXT 2:

A woman and her new boyfriend were found burned alive in bed together yesterday after her former lover allegedly set light to her Tuen Mun home.

The 32-year-old suspect had allegedly got into the woman's 21st-floor flat in Castle Peak Road after climbing in through the kitchen window at about 9am.

"He allegedly poured gasoline into one of the bedrooms through the door gap when his ex-girlfriend and her boyfriend were asleep inside," a police source said.

"He set the inflammable liquid alight and then ran out of the unit through the main door."

EXERCISE 2

Text 1:

There **have** been many articles and letters in the South China Morning Post about the proposed ban on smoking in restaurants.

As a teenager, not only must I **endure** second-hand smoke when I **am** out eating, but I also have to put up with it when I play sports in public playgrounds, play video games in a games centre, and when I surf the Net at Internet cafes.

I understand that a smoking ban **is** already in place in certain public areas, however, I see

little being done to punish those who **flout** the regulations.

Unless the government **decides** to take action, for example, increasing fines for people who **disobey** the law, there **is** little point in extending the ban if smokers **continue** to ignore it.

Text 2:

Two men **have** been caught using a video camera to record a preview of a film - the first arrest of its kind since an amended copyright law came into effect in April last year.

The two, aged 26 and 27, **were** arrested at the Broadway Theatre in Sai Yeung Choi Street, Mongkok, during a preview of the Hong Kong-made action movie So Close on Saturday. They **were** caught with a digital video camera and two cassettes.

The new film **stars** Taiwanese actress Shu Qi and Shaolin Soccer's Karen Mok Man-wai and Vicky Zhao Wei. It **centres** on an international conspiracy involving murders and computer viruses.

Text 3:

Cinemas **expect** attendance levels to double from today when ticket prices **are** cut to \$25 for films screened on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Box-office takings **have** slumped to record lows this summer, diving more than 45 per cent from \$386 million last year.

In July last year, the local smash hits Shaolin Soccer and Love on a Diet together grossed \$90 million, but this year the biggest releases, Men In Black II and Minority Report, **have** taken only half that amount.