

## SUBJECT – VERB AGREEMENT

*Being able to find the right subject and verb will help you correct errors of subject-verb agreement.*

**Basic Rule.** A singular subject (*she, Bill, car*) takes a singular verb (*is, goes, shines*), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

**Example:** *The list of items is/are on the desk.*

If you know that *list* is the subject, then you will choose *is* for the verb.

**Rule 1.** A subject will come before a phrase beginning with *of*. This is a key rule for understanding subjects. The word *of* is the culprit in many, perhaps most, subject-verb mistakes.

Hasty writers, speakers, readers, and listeners might miss the all-too-common mistake in the following sentence:

**Incorrect:** *A bouquet of yellow roses lend color and fragrance to the room.*

**Correct:** *A bouquet of yellow roses lends . . . (bouquet lends, not roses lend)*

**Rule 2.** Two singular subjects connected by *or, either/or, or neither/nor* require a singular verb.

**Examples:**

*My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today.*

*Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.*

*Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.*

**Rule 3.** The verb in an *or, either/or, or neither/nor* sentence agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it.

**Examples:**

*Neither the plates nor the serving bowl goes on that shelf.*

*Neither the serving bowl nor the plates go on that shelf.*

This rule can lead to bumps in the road. For example, if *I* is one of two (or more) subjects, it could lead to this odd sentence:

**Awkward:** *Neither she, my friends, nor I am going to the festival.*

If possible, it's best to reword such grammatically correct but awkward sentences.

**Better:**

*Neither she, I, nor my friends are going to the festival.*

**OR**

*She, my friends, and I are not going to the festival.*

**Rule 4.** As a general rule, use a plural verb with two or more subjects when they are connected by *and*.

**Example:** *A car and a bike are my means of transportation.*

But note these exceptions:

**Exceptions:**

*Breaking and entering is against the law.*

*The bed and breakfast was charming.*

In those sentences, *breaking and entering* and *bed and breakfast* are compound nouns.

**Rule 5.** Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by such words as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, *not*, etc. These words and phrases are not part of the subject. Ignore them and use a singular verb when the subject is singular.

**Examples:**

*The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.*

*Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.*

**Rule 6.** With words that indicate portions—*a lot*, *a majority*, *some*, *all*, etc.—Rule 1 given earlier is reversed, and we are guided by the noun after *of*. If the noun after *of* is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

**Examples:**

*A lot of the **pie** has disappeared.*

*A lot of the **pies** have disappeared.*

*A third of the **city** is unemployed.*

*A third of the **people** are unemployed.*

*All of the **pie** is gone.*

*All of the **pies** are gone.*

*Some of the **pie** is missing.*

*Some of the **pies** are missing.*

**NOTE**

In recent years, the SAT testing service has considered *none* to be strictly singular.

However, according to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*:

"Clearly *none* has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. The notion that it is singular only is a myth of unknown origin that appears to have arisen in the 19th century. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. Both are acceptable beyond serious criticism." When *none* is clearly intended to mean "not one," it is followed by a singular verb.

**Rule 7.** In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the true subject follows the verb.

**Examples:**

*There are four hurdles to jump.*

*There is a high hurdle to jump.*

*Here are the keys.*

**NOTE:**

The word *there's*, a contraction of *there is*, leads to bad habits in informal sentences like *There's a lot of people here today*, because it's easier to say "there's" than "there are." Take care never to use *there's* with a plural subject.

**Rule 8.** Use a singular verb with distances, periods of time, sums of money, etc., when considered as a unit.

**Examples:**

*Three miles **is** too far to walk.*

*Five years **is** the maximum sentence for that offense.*

*Ten dollars **is** a high price to pay.*

**BUT**

*Ten dollars (i.e., dollar bills) **were** scattered on the floor.*

**Rule 9.** Some collective nouns, such as *family, couple, staff, audience*, etc., may take either a singular or a plural verb, depending on their use in the sentence.

**Examples:**

*The staff **is** in a meeting.*

*Staff **is** acting as a unit.*

*The couple disagree about disciplining their child.*

*The couple refers to two people who are acting as individuals.*

**NOTE**

Anyone who uses a plural verb with a collective noun must take care to be accurate—and also consistent. It must not be done carelessly. The following is the sort of flawed sentence one sees and hears a lot these days:

*The staff **is** deciding how they want to vote.*

Careful speakers and writers would avoid assigning the singular *is* and the plural *they* to *staff* in the same sentence.

**Consistent:** *The staff **are** deciding how **they** want to vote.*

Rewriting such sentences is recommended whenever possible. The preceding sentence would read even better as:

*The staff members **are** deciding how they want to vote.*

**Rule 10.** The word *were* replaces *was* in sentences that express a wish or are contrary to fact:

**Example:** *If Joe **were** here, you'd be sorry.*

Shouldn't *Joe* be followed by *was*, not *were*, given that *Joe* is singular? But *Joe* isn't actually here, so we say *were*, not *was*. The sentence demonstrates the **subjunctive mood**, which is used to express things that are hypothetical, wishful, imaginary, or factually contradictory. The subjunctive mood pairs singular subjects with what we usually think of as plural verbs.

**Examples:**

*I wish it **were** Friday.*

*She requested that he **raise** his hand.*

In the first example, a wishful statement, not a fact, is being expressed; therefore, *were*, which we usually think of as a plural verb, is used with the singular subject *I*.

Normally, *he raise* would sound terrible to us. However, in the second example, where a request is being expressed, the subjunctive mood is correct.

**Note:** The subjunctive mood is losing ground in spoken English but should still be used in formal speech and writing.

### **EXERCISE**

*Choose the correct form of the verb that agrees with the subject.*

1. Annie and her brothers (is, **are**) at school.
2. Either my mother or my father (**is**, are) coming to the meeting.
3. The dog or the cats (is, **are**) outside.
4. Either my shoes or your coat (**is**, are) always on the floor.
5. George and Tamara (doesn't, **don't**) want to see that movie.
6. Benito (**doesn't**, don't) know the answer.
7. One of my sisters (**is**, are) going on a trip to France.
8. The man with all the birds (live, **lives**) on my street.
9. The movie, including all the previews, (take, **takes**) about two hours to watch.
10. The players, as well as the captain, (**want**, wants) to win.
11. Either answer (**is**, are) acceptable.
12. Every one of those books (**is**, are) fiction.
13. Nobody (know, **knows**) the trouble I've seen.
14. (**Is**, Are) the news on at five or six?
15. Mathematics (**is**, are) John's favorite subject, while Civics (**is**, are) Andrea's favorite subject.
16. Eight dollars (**is**, are) the price of a movie these days.
17. (Is, **Are**) the tweezers in this drawer?
18. Your pants (is, **are**) at the cleaner's.
19. There (was, **were**) fifteen candies in that bag. Now there (is, are) only one left!
20. The committee (**debates**, debate) these questions carefully.
21. The committee (leads, **lead**) very different lives in private.
22. The Prime Minister, together with his wife, (**greet**s, greet) the press cordially.
23. All of the CDs, even the scratched one, (is, **are**) in this case.

□ **The end** □