

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Basic Principle: Singular subjects need singular verbs; plural subjects need plural verbs.

Example: My **sister is** a teacher. My **brothers are** engineers.

1. The indefinite pronouns **anyone, everyone, someone, no one, nobody** are always singular and, therefore, require singular verbs.

Example: Everyone **is** ready.
Somebody **has left** her purse.

Some indefinite pronouns — such as **all, some** — are singular or plural depending on what they're referring to. (Is the thing referred to countable or not?) Be careful choosing a verb to accompany such pronouns.

Example: Some of the books **are** missing.
Some of the oil **is** gone.

There is one indefinite pronoun, **none**, which can be either singular or plural; it often doesn't matter whether you use a singular or a plural verb — unless something else in the sentence determines its number. (Writers generally think of **none** as meaning *not any* and will choose a plural verb, as in "*None of the students are studying,*" but when something else makes us regard **none** as meaning *not one*, we want a singular verb, as in "*None of the food is cooked.*")

Example: None of you **eats** meat.
None of you **eat** meat.
None of the students **have done** their homework. (In this last example, the word **their** precludes the use of the singular verb.)

Some indefinite pronouns are particularly troublesome. "**everyone**", "**everybody**" and "**everything**" (listed above, also) certainly feel like more than one person; therefore, you are sometimes tempted to use a plural verb with them. They are always singular, though. "**Each**" is often followed by a prepositional phrase ending in a plural word ("*Each of the students*"), which confuses the verb choice. **Each**, too, is always singular and requires a singular verb.

Example: Everyone **has** gone.

You would always say, "*Everybody is here.*" This means that the word is singular and nothing will change that.

Example: Each of the students **is** responsible for keeping this room clean.

Don't let the word "students" confuse you; the subject is "**each**" and "**each**" is always singular — Each is responsible.

2. Phrases such as “*together with*”, “*as well as*”, and “*along with*” are not the same as *and*. The phrase introduced by *as well as* or *along with* will modify the earlier word (*mayor* in this case), but it does not compound the subjects (as the word *and* would do).

Example:

The mayor as well as his brothers **is** going to prison.

The mayor and his brothers **are** going to jail.

3. The pronouns *neither* and *either* are singular and require singular verbs even though they seem to be referring, in a sense, to two things.

Example:

Neither of the two traffic lights **is** working.

Which shirt do you want for Christmas?

Either **is** fine with me.

In informal writing, *neither* and *either* sometimes take a plural verb when these pronouns are followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with *of*. This is particularly true of interrogative constructions: “Have either of you two clowns read the assignment?” “Are either of you taking this seriously?”

4. The conjunction *or* does not conjoin (as *and* does): when *nor* or *or* is used the subject closer to the verb determines the number of the verb. Whether the subject comes before or after the verb doesn't matter; the proximity determines the number.

Example:

Either my father or my brothers **are** going to sell the house.

Neither my brothers nor my father **is** going to sell the house.

Are either my brothers or my father responsible?

Is either my father or my brothers responsible?

Because a sentence like “Neither my brothers nor my father is going to sell the house” sounds peculiar, it is probably a good idea to put the plural subject closer to the verb whenever that is possible.

5. The words *there* and *here* are never subjects.

Example:

There **are** two reasons [plural subject] for this.

There **is** no reason for this.

Here **are** two apples.

With these constructions (called expletive constructions), the subject follows the verb but still determines the number of the verb.

6. Sometimes modifiers will get between a subject and its verb, but these modifiers must not confuse the agreement between the subject and its verb.

Example:

The **mayor**, who has been convicted along with his four brothers on four counts of various crimes but who also seems, like a cat, to have several political lives, **is** finally going to jail.

7. Sometimes nouns take weird forms and can fool us into thinking they're plural when they're really singular and vice-versa. Words such as *glasses*, *pants*, *pliers*, and *scissors* are regarded as plural (and require plural verbs) unless they're preceded the phrase *pair of* (in which case the word *pair* becomes the subject).

Example:

My glasses **were** on the bed.

My pants **were** torn.

A pair of plaid trousers **is** in the oven.

8. Some words end in -s and appear to be plural but are really singular and require singular verbs.

Example:

The news from the front **is** bad.

Measles **is** a dangerous disease for pregnant women.

On the other hand, some words ending in -s refer to a single thing but are nonetheless plural and require a plural verb.

Example:

My assets **were** wiped out in the depression.

The average worker's earnings **have** gone up dramatically.

Our thanks **go** to the workers who supported the union.

The names of sports teams that do not end in "s" will take a plural verb:

Example:

The Miami Heat **have** been looking ... ,

The Connecticut Sun **are** hoping that new talent

9. Fractional expressions such as *half of*, *a part of*, *a percentage of*, *a majority of* are sometimes singular and sometimes plural, depending on the meaning. (The same is true, of course, when *all*, *any*, *more*, *most* and *some* act as subjects.) Sums and products of mathematical processes are expressed as singular and require singular verbs. The expression "more than one" (oddly enough) takes a singular verb: "More than one student has tried this."

Example:

Some of the voters **are** still angry.

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Based on http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/sv_agr.htm

A large percentage of the older population **is** voting against her.
Two-fifths of the troops **were** lost in the battle.
Two-fifths of the vineyard **was** destroyed by fire.
Forty percent of the students **are** in favor of changing the policy.
Forty percent of the student body **is** in favor of changing the policy.
Four times four divided by two **is** eight.
Two and two **is** four.

10. If your sentence compounds a positive and a negative subject and one is plural, the other singular, the verb should agree with the positive subject.

Example:

The department members but not the chair **have decided** not to teach on Valentine's Day.

It is not the faculty members but the president who **decides** this issue.

It was the speaker, not his ideas, that **has provoked** the students to riot.

EXERCISES

Cross out the incorrect verb form. Then write the correct form of the verb in the space provided. Mark any sentences that are correct with a C.

- _____ 1. The price of those orange chairs have been reduced drastically.
- _____ 2. The tomato sets that was planted yesterday were accidentally mowed down today.
- _____ 3. Many tables at the flea market was covered with very old comic books.
- _____ 4. The old woman rooting through those trash cans has refused to enter the county nursing home.
- _____ 5. Why do Bill always look so depressed in the morning?
- _____ 6. Ted checked with the employment agencies that was helping him try to find a job.
- _____ 7. Trucks, cars, and buses uses our street heavily since the city set up the detour.
- _____ 8. The vicious gossip about our new minister have begun to anger me.
- _____ 9. Those ugly plastic seat covers on our car's bucket seats has been confiscated by the Department of Homeland Security.
- _____ 10. Tom and his brother play piano duets.
- _____ 11. Why has Mary and Donna quit their jobs as moustache models?
- _____ 12. One dancer at the rehearsals have become ill from the humidity.
- _____ 13. The buildings across the alley is all going to be repainted.
- _____ 14. Those old shirts in your closet has a dust line on their shoulders.
- _____ 15. Rugby and water polo is the new intramural sports at SIU.

Write the proper verb form.

1. Before the play begins, we (to find)_____our own seats.
2. The lovers currently (to meet)_____at the old reservation, although, in the past, they (to meet)_____at Shuttleberry Point.

In the following sentences, write either the present-perfect or the past perfect verb form, whichever is appropriate.

1. After I (travel)_____for several hours, I stopped to eat lunch.
2. After I (travel)_____for several hours, I usually stop to eat lunch.
3. Charles already (talk)_____to several people before he decided.
4. Charles (talk)_____to several people, and now he is ready to decide.

Fill in the proper past-tense or past-participle form of the verb in parentheses.

1. After the party had (draw)_____to a close, Beckford (take)_____up residence in the Abbey.
2. As time (go)_____by, it also (steal)_____away his fortune.
3. He (fly)_____into a fit of laughter. He (beat)_____the odds, and so he (do)_____n't mind that his tower had (break)_____apart.

Above each line, change the verb forms when necessary.

1. I could have did a better job.
2. They have never ran that far before.
3. She has simply worn, torn, and beat us down.