

Subject / Verb Agreement

WHAT IS AGREEMENT?

As you know, when words agree they are of the same number. This concept means that singular subjects take singular verbs. Singular means one; plural means more than one.

CHOOSE BETWEEN SINGULAR AND PLURAL VERBS

To decide whether to use a singular or a plural verb, first determine whether your subject is singular or plural. Most plural nouns end in –s or –es.

Singular: *horse, dress*

Plural: *horses, dresses*

With singular nouns, use verbs that end in –s or –es. Otherwise, use the simple form of the verb.

Singular: *The horse runs through the field.*

Plural: *Horses run through the field.*

CAUTION: Use verbs that end in –s or –es with pronouns in the third person singular. These are *he, she, it, and one*. Otherwise, use the basic form of the verb.

WORK WITH COMPOUND SUBJECTS

Subject Joined By **AND**

Use plural verbs with compound subjects, which are joined by *and*.

Brazil and Argentina border [not borders] Uruguay.

Where were [not was] she and you on the night of the murder?

Subject Joined by **OR**

Use singular verbs with subjects joined by *or* if both subjects are singular.

Bill or Sam has [not have] been elected to feed the pig.

Use plural verbs with subjects joined by *or* if both subjects are plural.

I can't remember whether the Marx Brothers or the Three Stooges are [not is] her favorite comedians.

If one subject is singular and the other is plural, the verb agrees with the one that is closer to it.

Millie's brother or her sisters are scheduled to visit next October.

BUT

Millie's sisters or her brother is scheduled to visit next October.

COMPOUND SUBJECTS FOLLOWED BY SINGULAR COMPLEMENTS

A complement is a noun or adjective that describes the subject but comes after the verb. When a compound subject is followed by a complement, the verb is plural even if the complement is singular.

*Overeating and forcing yourself to vomit **are** [not is] a symptom of bulimia.*

COMPOUND SUBJECTS THAT NAME THE SAME PERSON, PLACE, OR THING

When the parts of a compound subject name the same person, place, or thing, the verb is singular.

The commander of the colonial army and our first president was [not were] George Washington.

COMPOUND SUBJECTS AS ONE UNIT

When two subjects form a unit, the verb should be singular.

Peas and carrots is [not are] my favorite side dish.

CAUTION: When the subjects are considered separate items, the verb should be plural.

Peas and carrots grow [not grows] in the garden by the window.

RELATIVE PRONOUNS FOLLOWING COMPOUND SUBJECTS

When a relative pronoun (*that, which, who, whom, or whose*) refers to compound elements, the verb following that pronoun is plural.

Spanish and Portuguese, which are [not is] Romance languages, are both spoken in Europe and South America.

ADJECTIVES USED TO FORM COMPOUND SUBJECTS

If separate are used to distinguish two types of the same noun, the verb is plural even if the noun is singular.

College and professional football share [not shares] many of the same rules.

MASTER SPECIAL SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT PROBLEMS

RELATIVE PRONOUNS AS SUBJECTS

When a pronoun – *who*, *which*, or *that* – is a subject, make the verb agree with its , the word to which a pronoun refers.

The movie was about a woman who wins the lottery.

The subject of *who wins the lottery* is *who*. The antecedent of *who* is *woman*. Woman is singular; therefore, *who* takes a singular verb, *wins*.

GERUNDS AS SUBJECTS

A gerund is a noun that ends in *-ing* and that stands for an activity: *running*, *writing*, *studying*, *working*, *reading*, *understanding*. Deal with gerunds as you would other nouns.

Donating food at our church helps [not help] the needy.
Swimming and running are [not is] my favorite exercises.

SENTENCES THAT BEGIN WITH *THERE* / *HERE*

If a sentence begins with *there* or *here*, the subject comes after the verb. Look for it there.

Once there were [not was] two men who claimed to be the true pope.
Here are [not is] your two choices: either get a job or get out!

VERBS THAT COME BEFORE SUBJECTS

If the verb comes before the subject, read the whole sentence and find the subject before deciding whether the verb is singular or plural.

At the end of the Reflecting Pool stands the Washington Monument.
From the top of Mt. Etna rise smoke and ash, warning inhabitants and tourists alike that it is time to leave.

SINGULAR NOUNS THAT END IN *-S*

Some singular nouns end in *-s*. These include academic subjects such as *mathematics*, *statistics*, and *physics*. *News*, *mumps*, *tennis*, *politics*, and *acoustics* are also singular. Such nouns take singular verbs.

Not: *Genetics are the study of heredity.*
But: *Genetics is the study of heredity.*

TITLES

Titles of books, movies, television programs, plays, and other works are always considered singular. They take singular verbs.

Not: *Dubliners are a book of short stories by Joyce.*

But: *Dubliners is a book of short stories by Joyce.*

TERMS OF QUANTITY

Words that name quantities, such as *majority*, *number*, *dollars*, and *years*, are singular or plural depending on their use. If you are considering items together in one group, use a singular verb. If you are considering separate items within a group, use a plural verb.

Singular: *The number of people in this club is increasing.*

Plural: *A number of people in this club are retirees.*

WORK WITH PHRASES AND CLAUSES BETWEEN SUBJECTS AND VERBS

FINDING THE TRUE SUBJECT

Words that come between the subject and verb can sometimes hide the real subject of a sentence.

Not: *The attractions of the city includes its many parks.*

But: *The attractions of the city include its many parks.*

In the first sentence, the writer mistakenly assumes that the subject is *city*, which would take the singular verb *includes*. But the real subject is *attractions*, a plural noun that takes the plural verb *include*.

To find the true subject of a sentence, first look for the sentence's verb. The verb is the word that conveys action or that helps describe another word by linking it with an adjective.

Shows action: *Students sitting in the last row never ask questions.*

Describes: *Our hopes of winning the game were dead.*

After finding the sentence's verb, ask the question, *Who or what does the action?* Or *Who or what is being described/identified?* That word will be the true subject.

Question: *Who never asks questions?* **Answer:** *Students.*

PAYING SPECIAL ATTENTION TO COLLECTIVE NOUNS

noun name groups of persons or things. They include words such as *family*, *tribe*, *nation*, *list*, *flock*, *pair*, and *team*. Usually, collective nouns are singular and take singular verbs no matter what words come between.

Not: *Every night, a family of raccoons attack my trash cans.*

But: *Every night, a family of raccoons attacks my trash cans.*

NOTE: The subject of the sentence is not *raccoons*; it is *family*, which is singular. Therefore, the verb must be singular.

WORK WITH INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

An [pronoun](#) stands for a noun that is not specified in the sentence. An easy way to remember indefinite pronouns is to place them into four categories.

OTHER INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

BODY WORDS	ONE WORDS	THING WORDS	OTHER INDEFINITE PRONOUNS		
Anybody	Anyone	Anything	All	Few	Much
Everybody	Everyone	Everything	Both	Little	Neither
Nobody	None	Nothing	Each	Many	Several
Somebody	No one	Something	Either	Most	Some
	One				
	Someone				

MAKING SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS AGREE WITH VERBS

Some indefinite pronouns are singular; they take singular verbs.

SINGULAR INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

Anybody	Everybody	Neither
Anyone	Everyone	Somebody
Anything	Everything	Someone
Each	Little	Something
Either	Much	

Everybody has [not have] to pay the registration fee.
My sisters are professionals; **each** has [not have] her own career.

MAKING PLURAL INDEFINITE PRONOUNS AGREE WITH VERBS

Some indefinite pronouns are plural; they take plural verbs.

Few survive [not survives] the effects of the disease.
The rebels were defeated; **several** were [not was] hanged.

USING INDEFINITE PRONOUNS THAT CAN BE SINGULAR OR PLURAL

In all cases, the verb is singular.

MAINTAIN SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT WHEN USING *EITHER/OR* AND *NEITHER/NOR*

Joining nouns and pronouns with *and* creates compound subjects, which are plural. But this situation isn't true when you use *or* and *nor* between subjects. *Or* and *nor* tell us to consider subjects separately, not together. The joining word helps us determine whether a verb should be singular or plural.

Sam and Paul ride motorcycles.

BUT

*Either Sam or Paul rides a Harley – Davidson.
Neither Sam nor Paul rides on Sundays.*

USING *EITHER/OR* AND *NEITHER/NOR* WHEN BOTH SUBJECTS ARE SINGULAR

Either/or and *neither/nor* constructions make us consider the two subjects separately, not as a pair. Therefore, if both subjects are singular, the verb must be singular:

Not: *Either Thailand or Sri Lanka were her home.*

But: *Either Thailand or Sri Lanka was her home.*

NOTE: The subjects is *Thailand* or *Sri Lanka*, not *Thailand and Sri Lanka*. Since both subjects are singular, the verb must be singular: *was*, not *were*.

USING *EITHER/OR* AND *NEITHER/NOR* WHEN BOTH SUBJECTS ARE PLURAL

You learned that if both subjects in an *either/or* or *neither/nor* sentence are singular, the verb is singular. By the same token, if both subjects are plural, the verb is plural

Not: *Neither the cats nor the dogs has torn the screen.*

But: *Neither the cats nor the dogs have torn the screen.*

USING *EITHER/OR* AND *NEITHER/NOR* WHEN ONE SUBJECT IS SINGULAR AND THE OTHER IS PLURAL

When one subject is singular and the other is plural, the subject closer to the verb determines whether the verb is singular or plural.

Neither the company nor the workers want a strike.

BUT

Neither the workers nor the company wants a strike.

In the first, *workers* is the subject closer to the verb. Since *workers* is plural, the verb is plural. In the second, *company* is closer to the verb. Since *company* is singular, the verb is singular.

USING *EITHER* AND *NEITHER* AS ADJECTIVES

When *either* or *neither* comes immediately before a noun, the noun is singular. Therefore, the verb that follows is also singular.

Either restaurant serves [not serve] the food we like.
Neither bookstore stocks [not stock] novels by Verga.

MAKE VERBS AGREE WITH COLLECTIVE NOUNS

A [noun](#) names a single unit. It stands for a group of people or things. Although collective nouns seem to be plural, they are usually singular. Collective nouns usually take singular verbs.

The Congress has passed gun – control laws.
The National Football League employs hundreds of people.

Locate the verb in the sentences above. In each case, it comes directly after the subject.

Question: What do these verbs have in common?

Answer: They end in –s; they are all singular.

AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

Sometimes collective nouns refer to individuals in a group rather than to the group as a whole. In such cases, use a plural verb:

Group as a whole: The college, faculty numbers less than 80.
[The verb, *numbers*, is singular.]

Individuals within a group: The faculty come from several countries.
[The verb, *come*, is plural.]

WORKING WITH COLLECTIVE NOUNS FOLLOWED BY PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

CAUTION: Collective nouns are sometimes followed immediately by [phrase](#), which begin with words such as *of*, *on*, *to*, and *with*. When such phrases end in plural nouns, don't be fooled into thinking that the sentence's verb must be plural, too.

Instead, base your decision on the sentence's meaning. First, separate the prepositional phrase from the subject and verb. Then decide whether the verb is singular or plural.

	subject	verb
Singular:	The union of masons and artisans	organized in 1892.

BUT

	subject	verb
Plural:	A majority of voters	think their taxes are high.

WORKING WITH SUBORDINATE CLAUSES BETWEEN COLLECTIVE NOUNS AND VERBS

CAUTION: Subordinate clauses begin with relative pronouns such as *that, which, who, whom, and whose*. Don't let such clauses distract you when making verbs agree with collective nouns.

Not: *The club, which were once open only to men, now recruit women.*
But: *The club, which was once open only to men, now recruits women.*

USING NOUNS OF QUANTITY

Some nouns of quantity, though plural, really suggest just a single unit. They always take singular verbs.

Fifty dollars, hidden in my closet, has been stolen.
Thirty – five pounds is the price we paid for two theater tickets in London.

MAKE PRONOUNS AGREE WITH THEIR ANTECEDENTS – SIX RULES

Just as a verb agrees in number with its subject, a pronoun agrees with an antecedent, the word it refers to. Antecedents are nouns or other pronouns.

RULE 1: If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun that refers to it is singular. If the antecedent is plural, the pronoun that refers to it is plural.

Singular: *The Dow Jones Industrial Average surged; it rose more than 200 points.*
Plural: *Both the investor and her broker were jubilant; they both made money.*

RULE 2: Use singular pronouns to refer to nouns joined by *or, either ... or,* and *neither...nor* if both the nouns are singular. However, use plural pronouns if both nouns are plural.

Singular: *Neither Fred nor Bill has paid his [not their] dues.*
Plural: *Neither sea otters nor seals make their [not its] home in the Caribbean.*

RULE 3: Use a singular or plural pronoun to refer to a collective noun depending on the sense of that noun.

Singular: *The Cheng family researched its origins in China.*

Plural: *My family cannot agree on where to take their vacation.*

RULE 4: Use singular pronouns when you refer to indefinite pronouns.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

	One words		Body Words
each	anyone	no one	anybody
either	everyone	one	everybody
neither	none	someone	nobody
			somebody

Both men had amnesia; neither recalled his own name.

Komal and Sejal are bright women; either can hold her own in a political debate.

RULE 5: Use singular pronouns when referring to *each*, *either*, and *neither*, even when these words are followed by *of* phrases that end with plurals.

Neither of my aunts brags about her [not their] doctoral degree.

Each of the Cub Scouts was required to bring his [not their] lunch.

RULE 6: Use singular pronouns when referring to singular nouns that end in *-s*. These nouns include mathematics, physics, economics, and politics.

*Once again, politics rears **its** [not their] ugly head.*

AVOID SEXISM WHILE MAINTAINING AGREEMENT

WHAT ARE SEXIST PRONOUNS?

Indefinite pronouns, such as *anybody*, *someone*, and *something*, do not refer to specific persons or things. Indefinite pronouns are singular. But sometimes writers use only masculine pronouns -- *he*, *his*, and *him* -- to refer to indefinite pronouns. This usage can make writing sexist, and it offends readers.

AVOIDING SEXISM WHEN REFERRING TO INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

One way to avoid sexism is by using both masculine and feminine pronouns:

Sexism: *Anyone who parked in lot 3 must move his car.*

Revised: *Anyone who parked in lot 3 must move his or her car.*

A **second** way to avoid sexism is to replace the pronoun with an article: *a, an, or the*.

Sexist: *Each is free to express his opinion.*

Revised: *Each is free to express an opinion.*

A **third** way to avoid sexism is to replace the indefinite pronoun with a plural noun.

Sexist: *Everybody should vote his conscience.*

Revised: *Citizens should vote their conscience.*

AVOIDING SEXISM WHEN REFERRING TO GENERIC NOUNS

Most nouns in English are generic -- they are considered neither female nor male. Included are words such as *teacher, engineer, nurse, and judge*. Nongeneric nouns identify the sex of a person; they include *grandmother, father, and aunt*.

One way to avoid sexism when referring to generic nouns is by replacing a masculine pronoun with both a masculine and feminine pronoun.

Sexism: *A candidate for Senate should reveal his income tax returns.*

Revised: *A candidate for Senate should reveal his or her income tax returns.*

A **second** way to avoid sexism when referring to generic nouns is by replacing the pronoun with an article: *a, an, or the*.

Sexist: *A truck driver must have his commercial license.*

Revised: *A truck driver must have a commercial license.*

A **third** way to avoid sexism when referring to generic nouns is to replace a singular generic noun with a plural noun and then use a plural pronoun.

Sexist: *A person who believes in himself can achieve much.*

Revised: *People who believe in themselves can achieve much.*

Sample Quiz questions:

1. Choose the item with correct subject – verb agreement.
 - a. These Boston terriers runs fast.
 - b. These Boston terriers run fast.

Answer: b. These Boston Terriers run fast.

2. Choose the item with correct subject – verb agreement.
 - a. The Jeep Cherokee resembles the Explorer.
 - b. The Jeep Cherokee resemble the Explorer.

Answer: a. The Jeep Cherokee resembles the Explorer.