Subject-Verb Agreement


In English, subjects and verbs must agree in **number** (singular or plural) and **person** (first, second, or third). Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs.

Example:  
*Bob* is working as a camp counselor this summer. (The singular subject *Bob* agrees with the singular verb *is.*)  
*Jake and John* are competing in the state championship. (The plural subject *Jake and John* agrees with the plural verb *are.*)

**Subjects and Verbs Separated by Words or Phrases**

When words or phrases separate the subject and verb, the verb should agree with the subject, not with the words in the modifying phrase. To find the subject of the sentence, find the verb and ask *Who?* or *What?* is doing the action.

Example:  
*The houses* on Apple Street were built two years ago. (What were built? Houses were built. The plural verb *were* agrees with the plural subject *the houses*, not the phrase *on Apple Street.*)

**Compound Subjects Joined by *And***

Compound subjects joined by *and* are usually treated as plural; therefore, they use plural verbs.

Example:  
*Bob and Sarah* are moving to Washington this summer. (The plural subject *Bob and Sarah* agrees with plural verb *are.*)

When the compound subject is joined by *and* but represents a single idea or person, the compound subject is treated as a unit and a singular verb is used.

Example:  
*Ham and eggs* is a popular breakfast dish. (*Ham and eggs* refers to a single dish.)

When a compound subject joined by *and* is preceded by *each* or *every*, a singular verb is used.

Example:  
*Every* student and teacher has to wear a uniform. (The singular verb *has* agrees with *every*, not *student and teacher.*)

**Compound Subjects Joined by *Or***

Compound subjects joined by *or* or by *either . . . or* or *neither . . . nor* may take singular or plural verbs. When both subjects are singular, use a singular verb; if both subjects are plural, use a plural verb.

Example:  
*Either Sarah or Tom* has the exam schedule. (Both *Sara* and *Tom* are singular and agree with the singular verb *has.*)  
*Neither snakes nor rats* are considered good pets. (*Snakes and rats* are plural and agree with the plural verb *are.*)

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

Example:  
*Either the cats or the dog* is responsible for the mess. (The singular subject *dog* is closest to the verb so the singular verb *is* is used.)  
*Either the teacher or the students* are bringing the books. (The plural subject *students* is closest to the verb so the plural verb *are* is used.)

**Indefinite Pronouns as Subjects**

A verb must agree in number with an **indefinite pronoun** (pronouns that do not refer to a particular person, thing, or group) subject. Some indefinite pronouns are singular and take singular verbs. **Always singular:** *anybody, anyone, anything, each,*
either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, no one, nobody, nothing, one, somebody, someone, and something.

Example: Everyone in the office is invited to the charity benefit. (Everyone is always singular and agrees with the singular verb is.)

Some indefinite pronouns are plural and take plural verbs. **Always plural:** both, few, fewer, many, other/others, and several.

Example: Several students are attending the history lecture. (Several is always plural and agrees with the plural verb are.)

Other indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural depending on the noun they refer to. **Either singular or plural:** all, any, half, more, most, no, none, and some

Example: All of the food is bad. (All of the food refers to a single unit so the singular verb is is used.)

All of the cars are damaged. (All of the cars refers to numerous cars so the plural verb are is used.)

**Collective Nouns as Subjects**

Collective nouns name a group or a collection of persons or things (family, union, group, committee). When the collective noun refers to a group as a unit, a singular verb is used.

Example: The committee is meeting Friday. (The committee refers to a single group so the singular verb is is used.)

When the collective noun refers to the individuals or items that make up the group, a plural verb is used.

Example: The committee have met the requirements set by the board of directors. (The committee refers to each individual member of the committee so the plural verb have is used.)

**Singular Subject with Plural Forms of Nouns**

Some nouns that end in –s, such as statistics, economics, and mathematics, act as singular subjects; therefore, they use singular verbs.

Example: Statistics is Jake’s favorite subject. (Statistics is used as a singular subject with a singular verb is.)

However, when such a word has a plural meaning, use a plural verb.

Example: The researcher’s statistics are the basis for his argument. (Statistics is used as a plural subject with the plural verb are.)

**Inverted Subject-Verb Order**

In inverted sentences the subject follows the verb. The sentence may begin with a prepositional phrase, the words here or there, or the verb form of do. Even in this case, the subject and the verb must agree. If the sentence begins with a prepositional phrase, ask Who? or What? is doing the action.

Example: In the center of the mall stand four statues. (What stands in the center of the mall? Four statues. The plural verb stand agrees with the plural subject four statues.)

Here are the books that you ordered. (The plural verb are agrees with the plural subject books.)

Do the employees consent to the terms in the contract? (The plural verb consent agrees with the plural subject employees.)

**With Linking Verbs**

In sentences with linking verbs (verbs that link or join the subject with an adjective, a noun, or a pronoun), the verb agrees with the subject, not with the subject complement.

Example: Jake’s favorite food is chocolate chip cookies. (The singular verb is agrees with the singular subject food.)

Chocolate chip cookies are Jake’s favorite food. (The plural verb are agrees with the plural subject chocolate chip cookies.)

**With Relative Pronouns**

When using a relative pronoun (who, which, that, what, whatever, and whoever) to introduce a dependent clause, that verb in the clause should agree in number with the pronoun’s antecedent (the word to which the pronoun refers).

Example: Jake is the only one who has a security pass. (The singular verb has agrees with the singular antecedent one.)