

Subject-Verb Agreement 1

Verbs always agree with the subject noun in a sentence:

I always go to work early.

***She** always goes to work early.*

We are old

***The house** is old.*

However, there are many types of noun and noun phrase in English, and it can be difficult to know if a particular noun takes a **singular verb** (such as **DOES / HAS / AM / IS**) or a **plural verb** (**DO / HAVE / ARE**). Have a look below for some commonly difficult nouns:

1. When singular and plural are the same.

*'**The species** is on the brink of extinction.' (It...)*

*'**The species** are on the brink of extinction.' (They...)*

Here the noun 'species' does not change form to show a plural, even if the meaning changes. In this case, be careful about whether you are taking in the singular or plural meaning and make sure to change the verb. Other examples include: economics, sheep, politics, headquarters, series and fish (which has an alternative plural).

*'**The sheep** is herded by the sheepdog into the farmer's van' (It...)*

*'**The sheep** are herded by the sheepdog into the farmer's van' (They...)*

*'**Their country's politics** are a mystery to me' (Their opinions)*

*'**Politics** is a mystery to me' (The subject)*

*'**The BBC's new TV series** is excellent' (It..)*

*'**The BBC's new winter season TV series** are excellent' (They...)*

2. Nouns with no plural.

*'**The news about the king's death** has been reported around the world.' (It...)*

Many English learners will know that English has countable and uncountable nouns. When you want to show a plural countable noun, you use a 's' e.g. a hat / 3 hats. Uncountable nouns have no plural and always use a singular verb. But, 'news' is a noun that is uncountable AND ends in an 's', which can lead many learners to use the wrong verb form. Here are some more examples: school subjects, such as mathematics, gymnastics and physics; Games, such as dominos and darts and the disease: measles.

*'**Mathematics** is a hard subject' (It...)*

*'What does **measles** do?' (It...)*

3. Nouns with no singular

*'**The police** are coming! **The police** are coming!'*

Some nouns in English are collective. This means that they represent a group or number of objects together. In many cases, these nouns are considered to be plural all the time since they are collections of single pieces kept together. Because of this, they take a plural verb and have no singular noun form. Here are some more examples: staff, congratulations, cattle, thanks and fishes (an alternative plural which means the different species of fish which are in the same place).

'The staff are unhappy with the wage cut' (They...)

'Congratulations are due to you on your birthday' (They...)

'The supermarket has many fishes. They have been organized according to type.'

This also applies with 'pair nouns', i.e. nouns where two things are joined together. Examples of these are: glasses, scissors, tweezers, trousers, headphones and tights.

'My jeans don't fit anymore!' (They...)

'Are my glasses in the kitchen?' (They...)

'Tights were fashionable as far back as Henry VIII's time!' (They...)

Finally, in English we can combine the definite article THE with an adjective to create a group noun meaning 'all of..'. This is common for nationalities. They also take a plural verb.

'The British are coming. The British are coming.'

'The rich have the most to lose'

'The sick have suffered enough'

Subject-Verb Agreement 2

Verbs always agree with the subject noun in a sentence:

I always go to work early.

She always goes to work early.

We are old.

The house is old.

However, there are many types of noun and noun phrase in English, and it can be difficult to know if a particular noun takes a **singular verb** (such as **DOES / HAS / AM / IS**) or a **plural verb** (**DO / HAVE / ARE**). Have a look below for some commonly difficult nouns:

1. Collective nouns with both singular and plural.

'The government is debating the new law!' (It...)

'The government are debating the new law!' (They...)

Government is a **collective noun** and **represents a group of people**, like police. But unlike police, which is always plural, **the choice of singular or plural verb depends on** whether you consider the noun to be a **group of individuals** (e.g. **They are** debating) or a **single unit** (e.g. **It is** debating). Other examples include: family, crew, team, public, jury and committee.

'The whole family are a great bunch of people.' (They...)

'The whole family is a great bunch of people.' (It...)

'The jury haven't yet made a decision.' (They...)

'The jury hasn't yet made a decision.' (It...)

'The team don't have any worthy opponents.' (They...)

'The team doesn't have any worthy opponents.' (It...)

It's also worth noting that in a relative clause, we use **who for the group** and **which for the unit**.

*'The government, **who** are in talks now, are reviewing the law.'*

*'The government, **which** is in talks now, is reviewing the law.'*

*'The family **who** I met would never act that way.'*

*'The family **which** I met would never act that way.'*

*'The team, **which** has played so well this season, is in crisis.'*
*'The team, **who** have played so well this season, are in crisis.'*

2. Quantities & amounts, portions and mathematics.

*'3 **minutes** is perfect for tea.'* (It...)

'£100 is a fortune!' (It...)

*'24 **hours** is all I need'* (It...)

*'26 **miles** isn't so far!'* (It...)

Despite the fact that 3 is a plural number and minutes is a plural noun, **the sentence uses a singular verb**. This is because, **within the context**, three minutes is considered to be **one unit of time** (3 minutes together is enough time to make one cup of tea). This is true for amounts, distances, periods of time, quantities, weights sums of money, etc.

Consider the difference:

*There are **60 minutes** in an hour.* (We are counting the number of individual minutes)

***60 minutes** is perfect - I can get across town in that.* (We are judging the unit of time against what we need to do)

*'**One of my friends** has a Ferrari.'* (One...)

Be careful with **expressions with ONE**. Even if the noun is plural, we still **use a singular verb**.

*'**Half of the cake** was eaten.'* (...of it...)

*'**Half of the cakes** were eaten.'* (...of them...)

Be careful with portions! **The noun after 'of' dictates the verb**.

*'**Two and three** is/are five.'* (It/ They...)

*'**Two plus three** is five.'* (It...)

3. Indefinite nouns.

*'**Something** is coming.'* (It...)

*'**It** is making a terrible noise.'*

***Someone** is at the door! (He or She...) **They** are knocking loudly.*

*'**Everyone** was happy! **They** were dancing in the streets'*

*'**Nobody** knows what to do. **They** haven't understood fully yet!'*

Indefinite nouns take singular nouns. However, when **referring to the same person again**, we will **use the impersonal pronoun they...which takes a plural verb**.

Subject-Verb Agreement 3

Verbs always agree with the subject noun in a sentence:

***I** always go to work early.*

***She** always goes to work early.*

***We** are old.*

***The house** is old.*

However, there are many types of noun and noun phrase in English, and it can be difficult to know if a particular noun takes a **singular verb** (such as **DOES / HAS / AM / IS**) or a **plural verb** (**DO / HAVE / ARE**). Have a look below for some commonly difficult nouns:

1. And, Or, Neither, Nor.

'**The King and Queen** *are* coming!' (They...)

When **two nouns** are joined with '**and**,' we use a **plural verb**. But, when the two objects are so commonly classed together that they **become thought of as one unit**, we use a **singular verb**.

'**Fish and chips** *is* the best meal a man can have.' (It...)

Or when two nouns refer to the same thing (so be careful!)

'**The new CEO and majority shareholder** *is* coming.' (One person - He or She...)

'**The new CEO and majority shareholder** *are* coming.' (Two people - They...)

When two singular nouns are **joined with 'or'**, we use a **singular verb**, but if singular and plural nouns join in this way, **the verb agrees with the closest noun to it**. This is also true with expressions using **either/or and neither/nor**.

'**A pizza or a curry** *is* being delivered.'

'**A pizza or 3 curries** *are* being delivered.'

'**3 pizzas or a curry** *is* being delivered.' * (This sounds strange because English tends to put the plural last. '**A pizza or 3 curries** *are* being delivered.' is more natural.)

'**Either the cat or the dog** *goes*.'

'**Either the cat or the dogs** *go*.'

'**Neither I nor my family** *has* stolen anything.'

'**Neither my family nor I** *have* stolen anything.'

2: Separated subjects and verbs.

Sometimes in English we separate a subject and verb. This usually happens because of a **prepositional phrase, which is used to describe or qualify a noun**. They begin with a preposition such as: of, about, with, on, off, above, around, etc. For example:

'**This bunch of bananas** *is* ripe'

'**These bunches of bananas** *are* ripe.'

'**The house down the lane** *is* very cheap.'

'**The houses down the road** *are* very cheap.'

'**The attitude of the people** *has* remained unchanged.'

'**The attitudes of the people** *have* remained unchanged'

This can lead to some very long complicated sentences (although nouns as long as this example are unlikely):

The builder of the house of my family with the blue overalls in the white car on the main road just over the bridge next to the school *is* a nice man.

Fortunately, the solution is simple! **Ignore all the prepositional phrases between the 'head' noun and the verb!** This tells you which word to make the verb agree with.

'**This bunch** _____ *is* ripe'

'**These bunches** _____ *are* ripe.'

'**The builder** _____ *is* a nice man.'

This is true unless it's a portion, like 'half of the cake.', where the verb agrees with the noun after the 'of' (see Subject Verb Agreement part 2)

3. Singular or plural verb with a cleft sentence.

A cleft sentence is a structure English speakers use to emphasize a particular point. They often, though not always, start with a WH word.

'What really makes me angry is people who throw rubbish on the ground.'

'When I'd really like a holiday is next week!'

'Where he's been is in hospital.'

'The most interesting thing I saw last week was the elephant at the theatre.'

'The biggest mistake I ever made was driving home for Christmas.'

However, cleft sentences often **use very large subjects** (What really makes me angry) and **long complements** (people who throw rubbish on the ground) and because of this **the verb can agree with the subject or the complement** – which means, **in the case of a plural complement – the verb is plural.**

'What really makes me angry is people who throw rubbish on the ground.' (Verb agrees with subject)

'What really makes me angry are people who throw rubbish on the ground.' (Verb agrees with plural complement)

'The most interesting thing I saw last week was the elephant at the theatre.' (Verb agrees with subject)

'The most interesting thing I saw last week were the elephants at the theatre.' (Verb agrees with plural complement)