

Subject-Verb Agreement

****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****

Verbs in the present tense for third-person, singular subjects (he, she, it and anything those words can stand for) have s-endings. Other verbs do not add s-endings.

Examples:

He loves_ and she loves_ and they love_ and

****Rule 3****

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 John nor Carmen **is** available.

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

****Rule 4****

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

- Neither of the two traffic lights **is** working.
- Which shirt do you want for Christmas?
Either **is** fine with me.

****Rule 5****

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.

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.

****Rule 6****

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

Examples:

Everyone has done his or her homework.

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 is countable or not?).

Be careful choosing a verb to accompany such pronouns.

Examples:

Some of the beads **are** missing. (Beads = Countable)

Some of the water **is** gone. (Water = Uncountable)

On the other hand, there is one indefinite pronoun, **none**, that can be either singular or plural.

Writers generally think of **none** as meaning **not any** and will choose a plural verb, as in "None of the engines are working," but when **none** is clearly intended to mean "not one," it is followed by a singular verb, as in "None of the food is fresh."

Examples:

None of you **claims** responsibility for this incident? (Not one of you)

None of you **claim** responsibility for this incident? (Not any of you)

None of the students **have** done their homework. (In this example, the word their precludes the use of the singular verb).

Each is often followed by a prepositional phrase ending in a plural word (Each of the cars), thus confusing the verb choice. Each, too, is always singular and requires a singular verb.

Examples:

Each of the students is responsible for doing his or her work in the library.

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

****Rule 7****

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.

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

But note these exceptions:

Breaking and entering is against the law.

The bed and breakfast was charming.

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

****Rule 8****

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.

Also, phrases such as together with, as well as, and along with are not the same as **and** i.e., they do not compound the subjects (as the word **and** would do).

Examples:

The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.
Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.
The mayor, as well as his brothers, is going to prison.

****Rule 9****

With words that indicate portions—percent, fraction, 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.

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."

Examples:

Fifty percent of the **pie** has disappeared.
Fifty percent 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.
Some of the voters **are** still angry.
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.
Two and two **is** four.
Four times four divided by two **is** eight.

****Rule 10****

In sentences beginning with **here** or **there**, the true subject follows the verb. The words **here** and **there** are never subjects.

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

Examples:

There **are** four hurdles to jump. (Subject is plural that is Hurdles)

There **is** a high hurdle to jump. (Subject is singular that is Hurdle)

Here **are** the keys. (Subject is plural that is Keys)

There **are** two reasons for this. (Subject is plural that is Reasons)

There **is** no reason for this. (Subject is singular that is Reason)

Here **are** two apples. (Subject is plural that is Apples)

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 11****

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.

Note: The word **dollars** is a special case. When talking about an **amount/sum of money**, it requires a singular verb, but when referring to the dollars themselves, a plural verb is required.

Five dollars is a lot of money.

Dollars are often used instead of rubles in Russia.

****Rule 12****

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

Examples:

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.

****Rule 13****

Some words end in -s and appear to be plural but are really singular and require singular verbs. Nouns such as civics, mathematics, dollars, measles, and news require singular verbs.

Examples:

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

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

The news **is** on at six.

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

Examples:

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.

****Rule 14****

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.

Examples:

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.

****Rule 15****

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

Examples:

*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.

****Rule 16** (This has been covered separately in detail.)**

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).

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:

My glasses were on the bed.

My pants were torn.

A pair of plaid trousers is in the closet.

The committee debates these questions carefully. (Committee acting as a single unit)

The committee lead very different lives in private. (Individuals who are in the committee, obviously all of them have different lives, therefore more than one life hence the plural verb).

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.