

Subject-Verb Agreement (Syntax)

I. Introduction & Core Principle

Definition: Subject-Verb Agreement (also known as Concord or Syntax) is a fundamental grammatical rule stating that the verb in a sentence must agree in number (singular or plural) with its subject.

It's the agreement between the grammatical number of the subject and the grammatical number of the verb.

Importance: This topic is crucial for error detection, sentence improvement, cloze tests, and paragraph arrangement (P-Q-R-S) in competitive exams, often accounting for a significant portion of grammar questions.

What can be a Subject?

A subject in a sentence can only be a **Noun** or a **Pronoun**.

Singular/Plural Forms:

Nouns: Typically, adding '-s', '-es', or '-ies' to a noun makes it plural. Some nouns have irregular plural forms (e.g., child → children, man → men, tooth → teeth).

Pronouns: Pronouns have distinct singular and plural forms (e.g., he → they, she → they, it → they, I → we). The pronoun 'You' is unique; it always takes a plural verb, whether it refers to one person or many.

Verbs: This is where the common confusion arises.

Rule: When '-s', '-es', or '-ies' is added to a **verb** (in Simple Present Tense), it becomes **singular**.

II. Identifying the True Subject: The Role of Qualifiers and Prepositions

Core Rule: The verb must agree with the **main subject** of the sentence, not with any qualifiers or objects of prepositions that come between the subject and the verb.

Grammar Rules:

1. **Prepositional Phrases:** When a prepositional phrase (starting with 'of', 'in', 'on', 'with', 'for', etc.) comes between the subject and the verb, the verb agrees with the noun/pronoun before the preposition, as the noun/pronoun after the preposition is its object.
 - a) The **knowledge** of languages **is** essential.
 - b) The **decoration** of the rooms **is** beautiful.

2. **Qualifiers:** Qualifiers are words or phrases that provide additional information about the subject but are not the subject themselves. The verb must ignore these and agree with the main subject.
 - a) The **growth** in economic sectors **has** been impressive.
 - b) The **color** of his eyes **is** blue.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

'This/These' and 'That/Those': These demonstrative adjectives must agree in number with the noun they modify. This is often a clue for subject identification.

- o **These types** of cars **are** expensive.
(Subject: 'types', plural)

Note: Prepositions are powerful tools for identifying the true subject. Anything following a preposition (until the next verb or clause) is usually an object or modifier, not the subject the verb needs to agree with.

III. Special Cases: Pronouns and Indefinite Pronouns

Grammar Rules:

1. **Pronoun 'You':** Always takes a plural verb, regardless of whether it refers to one person or many.
 1. You **go** to school every day.

2. **Pronoun 'I':** Takes a singular verb in Simple Present (I go, I am), but can take a plural verb in subjunctive/imaginary contexts.
 1. I **am** ready.
 2. If I **were** a bird, I would fly.

3. Indefinite Pronouns (Always Singular):

These pronouns refer to non-specific people or things and always take a singular verb.

List: Everybody, Everyone, Everything, Nobody, No one, Nothing, Somebody, Someone, Something, Anybody, Anyone, Anything.

1. **Everybody** wants to be rich.
2. **Nothing** is impossible.
3. **Somebody** has stolen my pen.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

'Nobody/No one/Nothing but': When 'nothing but' (meaning 'except') is used, the verb agrees with 'nothing' which is singular.

- o **Nothing but** some books **was** available.
(Subject: 'nothing', not 'books')
- o **Everybody** should do **his** work. (Not 'their')

Note: The singular nature of indefinite pronouns is a frequent test of subject-verb agreement.

IV. Distributive Pronouns and Adjectives (Each, Every, Either, Neither, None, Any)

Grammar Rules: These words are almost always treated as singular when they function as subjects or when they modify a singular noun acting as a subject.

1. 'Each' as Subject/Adjective:

Rule (as Pronoun): Each is singular and takes a singular verb.

Rule (as Adjective): Each + singular noun + singular verb.

Rule (Each of the): Each of the + plural noun/pronoun + singular verb. (The verb agrees with 'each', not the object of 'of').

Examples:

1. **Each** was present.
2. **Each boy** was present.
3. **Each of the boys** is intelligent.

4. 'Every' as Adjective:

Rule: Every is always an adjective and never a pronoun. It cannot be a subject itself. It modifies a singular noun, and the verb agrees with that singular noun.

1. Every of the students was present. (X)
Every student was present.
2. **Each of the students** was present. (using 'each' as pronoun)

5. 'Either' / 'Neither' (for two entities):

Rule (as Pronoun): Either (meaning 'one of two') and Neither (meaning 'none of two') are singular and take a singular verb.

Rule (as Adjective): Either/Neither + singular noun + singular verb.

Rule (Either/Neither of the): Either/Neither of the + plural noun/pronoun + singular verb.

Examples:

1. **Neither of the shirts** is clean.
2. **Either path** leads to the city.
3. **Either** is available.

6. 'Any' / 'None' (for more than two entities):

Rule: When referring to more than two, Any (for one out of many) and None (for none out of many) are used. They are singular and take a singular verb.

1. **None of the three boys** was present.
2. **Any of the students** can help. (Meaning one student)

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

'Each and Every': When 'each' and 'every' are used together (often for emphasis), they still take a singular verb.

- o **Each and every student** is important.

'Each' and 'Every' with 'and': If 'each' or 'every' precedes two singular nouns joined by 'and', the verb is still singular.

- o **Each man and each woman** was present. (Not 'were')

Note: The singular nature of 'each', 'every', 'either', 'neither', 'none', and 'any' (when used appropriately) is a cornerstone of subject-verb agreement.

V. Subjects Joined by 'And', 'Or', 'Nor', 'Not only...but also'

Grammar Rules:

1. Subjects Joined by 'And':

- a) **Rule 1 (Generally Plural):** If two or more subjects are joined by 'and', they form a compound subject and take a plural verb.
- a. **Ram and Mohan** are friends.
- b) **Rule 2 (Single Unit/Idea):** If two subjects joined by 'and' refer to the same person/thing or express a single idea/unit, the verb is singular.
- a. **Slow and steady** wins the race. ('Slow and steady' is a single concept)
- b. **Bread and butter** is his only food. (Considered a single meal item)
- c. The **secretary and treasurer** is present. (If 'the' is used only once, it refers to one person holding both positions)
- d. My **friend and advisor** is here. (One person who is both friend and advisor)
- c) **Rule 3 (Separate Individuals):** If two subjects joined by 'and' refer to distinct individuals (indicated by separate articles/possessive adjectives), the verb is plural.
- a. The **secretary and the treasurer** are present. (Two different people)
- b. My **friend and my advisor** are here. (Two different people)

2. Subjects Joined by 'Or', 'Nor', 'Either...or', 'Neither...nor', 'Not only...but also':

- a) **Rule (Proximity/Closeness Rule):** The verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it.
- b) Either **Ram** or his **friends** are ready to work. (Friends is closer to 'are')
- c) Neither his **assistant** nor his **colleagues** were present. (Colleagues is closer to 'were')
- d) Not only the **students** but also the **teacher** was blamed. (Teacher is closer to 'was')

Nuance: In these constructions, if one subject is singular and the other is plural, place the plural subject closer to the verb for natural flow, though the rule still applies.

- 3. **Subjects Joined by 'Not':** When one subject is positive and the other is negative (joined by 'not'), the verb agrees with the positive subject.

- a) The **thief** and not his sons **was** present. (Verb agrees with 'thief', not 'sons')

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

Collective Nouns: Collective nouns can take either a singular or plural verb depending on whether they are acting as a single unit or as individuals.

- a. The **team** is performing well.
- b. The **team** are arguing among themselves.

Note: The proximity rule for 'or', 'nor', 'either...or', 'neither...nor', and 'not only...but also' is a common source of error.

VI. Subjects Joined by 'As well as', 'With', 'Along with', etc.

Grammar Rules:

When two subjects are joined by phrases like: **as well as**, **with**, **along with**, **together with**, **including**, **in addition to**, **accompanied by**, **unlike**, **besides** (as a preposition)

The verb agrees with the **first subject** (the one that appears before these connecting phrases).

- a) Ram, **as well as** his friends, **is** ready to work.
- b) The **teachers**, **with** the principal, **were** present.
- c) The **captain**, **together with** his sailors, **was** drowned.
- d) Rohan, **accompanied by** his family members and friends, **is** leaving. (Verb agrees with 'Rohan')
- e) The **decoration** of the room, **including** the furniture, **is** beautiful.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

First Subject Determines Verb: Regardless of the number of the second subject, the verb's number is determined solely by the first subject.

Prepositional Nature: Many of these connecting phrases act like prepositions, making the subsequent noun/pronoun an object, not a part of the compound subject.

Expert Note: These constructions often trick students into looking at the closer (but secondary) subject.

Always identify the true primary subject before the connecting phrase.

VII. Fractions, Percentages, and Proportions

Grammar Rules:

The verb agrees with the noun/pronoun following the fraction, percentage, or proportion.

Examples:

- **One-third** of the water **is** wasted.
- **Two-thirds** of the pillars **are** rotten.
- **50%** of the work **is** done.
- **A large percentage** of the students **are** present.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

Fraction as Noun: Although phrases like 'one-third' might seem singular, they function as modifiers, and the verb ultimately refers to the portion of the noun that follows 'of'.

Note: Don't let the numerical value of the fraction distract you; focus on the actual noun it refers to.

VIII. 'Some', 'Most', 'All', 'None', 'Any' (when referring to quantities)

Grammar Rules: These words can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns, and the verb agrees with the noun they refer to.

Examples:

- a) **Some** of the water **is** impure.
- b) **Most** of the students **are** present.
- c) **All** of the money **was** spent.
- d) **None** of the boys **have** arrived.

Errors Exceptions & Nuance:

'None' ambiguity: While 'none' technically means 'not one' (singular), it is often used with plural verbs when followed by a plural noun.

In exams, 'none of' + plural noun + singular verb is generally safer, but plural is also often accepted.

Note: The key is to determine whether the noun following these quantifying pronouns is countable (plural verb) or uncountable (singular verb).

IX. 'A lot of', 'Lots of', 'A great deal of', 'Plenty of'

Grammar Rules: These phrases mean 'a large quantity or number of' and their verb agreement depends on the noun they modify.

Example:

- a) **A lot of water** was wasted.
- b) **Lots of books** are available.
- c) **A great deal of money** is needed.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

Always check the noun: The phrase itself does not determine the verb; the noun it modifies does.

Note: Treat these phrases as a single quantifying unit, and then apply the standard countable/uncountable noun rules.

X. 'Many a', 'More than one', 'The number of', 'A number of'

Grammar Rules: These specific constructions have fixed agreement rules.

1. **'Many a':**
 - o **Many a student** has failed. (Despite 'many', the structure dictates singular)
2. **'A number of':**
 - o **A number of students** are present.
3. **'The number of':**
 - o **The number of students** is 1000.
4. **'More than one':**
 - o **More than one room** is available.
5. **'More' + plural noun + 'than one':**
 - o **More students than one** are present.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

'Many a' vs. 'A number of': A number of implies multiplicity, while many a emphasizes individuality within a large group, both lead to different agreements.

'The number of' vs. 'A number of': This is a critical distinction in exams. 'The' indicates a definite, singular unit (the count), while 'a' indicates an indefinite, plural quantity (many).

Note: These constructions are frequently tested. Memorize their specific agreement patterns.

XI. Specific Nouns with Peculiar Agreement

1. Names of Subjects/Diseases/Games ending in 's':

Rule (as Subject/Name): These are usually singular, despite ending in 's'.

- Mathematics**, is my favorite subject. **Physics** is difficult.
- Measles**, is a contagious disease. **Mumps** is painful.
- Billiards**, is a popular game. **Darts** is fun.

Exception (Mathematics/Politics/Statistics as Data/Calculations/Opinions): If these words refer to data, calculations, opinions, or specific aspects rather than the subject itself, they take a plural verb.

- The **mathematics** of this problem **are** complex.
 - Gandhi's politics** were admirable.
 - The **statistics** indicate that prices are rising.
- ### 2. Nouns of Distance, Time, Money, Weight (as a single unit):
- Rule:** When these refer to a specific quantity as a single unit, the verb is singular.
- Five hundred rupees** is a large sum. (Single amount)
 - Ten miles** is a long distance. (Single distance)

Exception (Divided/Separate): If the quantity is divided or refers to individual components, the verb is plural.

- Five hundred rupees** were distributed among the beggars. (Individual notes/coins)
- ### 3. Books/Titles/Names (even if plural-looking):
- Rule:** The title of a book, movie, country, etc., even if it contains plural words, is singular.
- Arabian Nights** is a collection of stories.
 - The United States** is a powerful country.

c. **The Himalayas** are a mountain range. (Note: 'Himalayas' itself is often treated as plural because it refers to a range of mountains, not a single peak. This is an exception to the 'book/country name' rule for a specific geographic feature.)

4. 'Wages':

Rule (Result/Punishment): If 'wages' means 'result' or 'punishment', the verb is singular.

Rule (Salary/Earnings): If 'wages' means 'salary' or 'earnings', the verb is plural.

Examples:

- The **wages of sin** is death.
- The **wages of the workers** are paid monthly.

XII. 'There' as an Introductory Subject Grammar Rules:

- 'There' as Dummy Subject:** 'There' is an introductory (dummy) subject and does not determine the verb's number. The verb agrees with the real subject that follows 'there'.
- o **There is** a message for you.
 - o **There are** many messages for you.

XIII. 'The + Adjective' Construction Grammar Rules:

1. 'The + Adjective' (Referring to a Class):

When 'the' is used before an adjective (e.g., the honest, the poor, the rich), it refers to a whole class of people and functions as a plural noun.

- o **The honest** are always rewarded.
- o **The poor** deserve our sympathy.

Errors & Exceptions & Nuance:

Not a Single Person: This construction never refers to a single individual, always to a group.

- **Note:** This is a concise way to refer to entire categories of people and consistently takes a plural verb.

--- End of Grammar Notebook:
Subject-Verb Agreement ---