

Subject-Verb Agreement



Adapted from *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11th Edition, Contributors Dayne Sherman, Jayetta Slawson, Natasha Whitton, and Jeff Wiemelt, 2010, 301-308. Prepared by the Southeastern Writing Center. Last updated July, 2011.

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*.)