

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT



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- A subject must correspond with its verb correctly to reduce reader confusion.
- **Typically:**
If the subject is singular, the verb is singular.
If the subject is plural, the verb is plural.
- Locating the subject in longer sentences can be challenging.
- There are exceptions to the basic subject-verb agreement rules.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT GUIDELINES

(1) Compound subject joined by conjunction “and”

A compound subject is two or more nouns (or pronouns) joined by a conjunction “and”.

It usually requires a plural verb agreement.

- *Memorial University and Marine Institute are located near the Pippy Park grounds in St. John’s.*

EXCEPTION: If the compound subject refers to a single idea or unit, then a single verb agreement is required.

- *Research and development continue to be an important part of the program.*

(2) Compound subject joined by conjunctions “or” or “nor”

Nouns or pronouns joined by “or” or “nor” will have the verb agreement selected by the closest noun or pronoun (rule of proximity).

- *The manager or the employees attend the gathering.*
- *The employees or the manager attends the gathering.*



(3) Compound subject joined by prepositional phrase

When using prepositional phrases to join nouns or pronouns instead of using “and”, the writer is stressing the first noun more than the second noun.

as well as, along with, in addition to, together with, combined with

Nouns or pronouns joined by such prepositional phrases will have the first noun agree with the verb.

- *Laptops as well as reliable internet are important for online learning.*

(4) Collective nouns as subjects

A collective noun refers to a group of things or people. The verb agreement will depend on the context. See examples below.

association, audience, band, class, committee, community, congregation, family, group, jury, staff, team, population

If the collective noun refers to one unit, it will have a singular verb agreement.

- *The science class is attending the conference*

If a collective noun refers to individual members of the group, it will have a plural verb agreement.

- *The science class are networking at the conference.*

(5) Indefinite pronouns, quantifiers, portions, and fractions

Indefinite pronouns refer to nonspecific individuals or objects. They do not refer to any person, amount, or thing in particular.

The following indefinite pronouns use singular verbs.

another, any-/body/thing/one, every-body/thing/one, each, either, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, other, some-body/thing/one

The following indefinite pronouns use plural verbs.

both, few, many others, several

If the following are paired with

- a singular noun, use a singular verb
- a plural subject, use a plural verb
- an uncountable noun, use a singular verb

a/the majority of, a number of, a lot of, plenty of, all of, each of, some of, a variety of, half of, any of, none of, a lot of, plenty of, all (of), some (of)

- *More of the university is transitioning to remote learning.*

NOTE:

the number of uses a singular verb

- *The number of students is increasing at the university.*

One of uses a singular verb

- *One of the best places in the city is Signal Hill.*

(6) Subjects referring to distance, money, measurement, weight, or mass

Such subjects usually agree with singular verbs.

- *Two metres is the recommended distance.*
- *16 kilometres is the Tely 10 road race distance.*
- *The missing \$100 dollars was located in the bag.*
- *45 pounds is limit for your baggage.*
- *Nine hours is a long flight for young children.*

When using *percent* with a singular or uncountable noun, use a singular verb.

- *Fifteen percent of the bill is recommended for a tip.*

EXCEPTIONS

When using *percent* with a plural noun, use a plural verb.

- *Seventeen percent of the students are international.*

When using a collective noun, the singular verb or plural verb can be used. Is the collective noun a whole unit or a collection of individuals? (see rule 5)

- *Eighty percent of the population is/are against the tuition increase*

When using *dollars*, the singular verb is used when referring to an amount of money. Use a plural verb when referring to the dollars themselves.

- *\$10 dollars is the weekly allowance from my parents.*
- *Dollars are used in Canada.*
- *Ten dollars are in the bottom of my bag.*

(7) Singular nouns that look plural (end with -s)

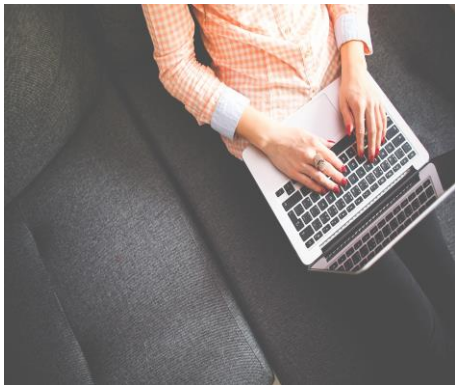
Some sports, diseases, and academic disciplines fall into this category. These nouns end with –s, but refer to a single idea or subject. They use a singular verb.

Examples: *athletics, billiards, gymnastics, darts, measles, mumps, economics, mathematics, news, physics, politics, statistics*

- *Mathematics was not my strongest subject in high school.*
- *The news is highlighting the European conference.*

EXCEPTION: depending on context

- *The statistics on climate change are alarming.*



(8) Special Sentence Subject

When the subject of a sentence is more complex, be sure the verb agrees with the main noun in the subject position.

- *Many participants in the international conference have arrived.*
- *User access in the digital world is limited in remote areas.*

When the true subject follows the verb, be sure the verbs and subject agree.

- *Among the audience members was the CEO.
[The CEO was among the audience members.]*
- *There was the CEO sitting in the back of the audience.*
- *There were the ushers standing along the aisles.*

If the subject is a clause, the verb takes the singular form.

- *Whoever reaches the finish line first wins the prize.*
- *That the company is in financial trouble is a concern for the local community.*

EXCEPTION:

If the clause is a “**what subject clause**” and the main noun following is singular, use the singular verb form.

- *What concerns the administration is the overuse of sick days.*

If the clause is a “**what subject clause**” and the main noun following is plural, the singular and plural verb forms are both accepted. The plural form is preferable in formal contexts.

- *What concerns the administration is/are mismanaged sick days*

(9) Adjective functioning as subject

Adjectives functioning as nouns are called adjectival nouns. Such nouns are introduced with “*the*”. The verb uses the plural verb form.

Examples: *blind, wealthy, rich, poor, injured, elderly, old*

- *The blind are having challenges accessing the resources during the power outage.*
- *The elderly use the paved walkways around the pond.*

(10) Gerund functioning as subject

A gerund is a form of a verb ending in **-ing** functioning as a noun.

When a gerund functions in the subject position, the singular verb form is used.

- *Note taking is challenging for many students.*

However, if two gerund subjects are joined by “**and**”, the verb is in the plural form.

- *Note taking **and** comprehending are challenging for many students*



SOURCES

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