

Subject verb agreement

Basic Rule. A singular subject (*she, Bill, car*) takes a singular verb (*is, goes, shines*), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

Example: The list of items is/are on the desk.

If you know that *list* is the subject, then you will choose *is* for the verb.

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

Two singular subjects connected by *or, either/or, or neither/nor* require a singular verb.

1. Examples:

* My aunt or my uncle **is** arriving by train today.

* Neither Juan nor Carmen **is** available.

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

Rule 3

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.

This rule can lead to bumps in the road. For example, if *I* is one of two (or more) subjects, it could lead to this odd sentence:

Awkward: *Neither she, my friends, nor I am going to the festival.*

If possible, it's best to reword such grammatically correct but awkward sentences.

Better:

Neither she, I, nor my friends are going to the festival.

OR

She, my friends, and I are not going to the festival.

Rule 4

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.*

But note these exceptions:

Exceptions:

Breaking and entering is against the law.

The bed and breakfast was charming.

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

Rule 5

1. 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.

Examples:

The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.

Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.

2. Parentheses are not part of the subject.

Example: *Joe (and his trusty mutt) **was** always welcome.*

If this seems awkward, try rewriting the sentence.

Rule 6

In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the true subject follows the verb.

Examples:

There are four hurdles to jump.

There is a high hurdle to jump.

Here are the keys.

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 7

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.*

Rule 8

With words that indicate portions—e.g., *a lot, a majority, some, all*—Rule 1 given earlier in this section 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.

Examples:

*A lot of the **pie** has disappeared.*

*A lot 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.*

In recent years, the SAT testing service has considered none to be strictly singular. However, according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage: "Clearly none has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. The notion that it is singular only is a myth of unknown origin that appears to have arisen in the 19th century. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. Both are acceptable beyond serious criticism." When none is clearly intended to mean "not one," it is followed by a singular verb.

Rule 9

With **collective nouns** such as *group, jury, family, audience, population*, the verb might be singular or plural, depending on the writer's intent.

Examples:

*All of my **family** has arrived OR have arrived.*

*Most of the **jury** is here OR are here.*

*A third of the **population** was not in favor OR were not in favor of the bill.*

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.

Rule 10

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

Example: *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 *it*. (Technically, *it* is the singular subject of the object clause in the subjunctive mood: *it were Friday*.)

Normally, *he raise* would sound terrible to us. However, in the second example, where a request is being expressed, the subjunctive mood is correct.