

Subject-Verb Agreement

Basic Principle: Singular subjects need singular verbs; plural subjects need plural verbs.

My **brother** is a nutritionist. My **sisters** are mathematicians.

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

- 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 countable or not?) Be careful choosing a verb to accompany such pronouns.

- Some of the beads **are** missing.
- Some of the water **is** gone.

On the other hand, there is one indefinite pronoun, *none*, that can be either singular or plural; it doesn't matter whether you use a singular or a plural verb — unless something else in the sentence determines its number. (Most writers think of "none" as meaning "not one of" and choose a singular verb.)

- None of you **claims** responsibility for this incident?
- None of you **claim** responsibility for this incident?
- None of the students **have done** their homework. (In this last example, the word their precludes the use of the singular verb.)

Some indefinite pronouns are particularly troublesome: **everyone** and **everybody** (listed above, also), which certainly feel like more than one person and, therefore, should use a plural verb; and **each**, which is often followed by a prepositional phrase ending in a plural word, confusing the verb choice. These pronouns are always singular and require a singular verb.

Everyone **has** finished his or her homework.

You would always say, "Everybody *is* here." This means that the word is singular and nothing will change that.

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.

Phrases such as *together with*, *as well as*, and *along with* are not the same as *and*. The phrase introduced by *as well as* or *along with* will modify the earlier word (*mayor* in this case), but it does not compound the subjects (as the word *and* would do).

- The mayor as well as his brothers **is** going to prison.
- The mayor and his brothers **are** going to jail.

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.

In informal writing, *neither* and *either* sometimes take a plural verb when these pronouns are followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with *of*. This is particularly true of interrogative constructions: "Have either of you two clowns read the assignment?" "Are either of you taking this seriously?" Burchfield calls this "a clash between notional and actual agreement."*

The conjunction *or* does not conjoin (as *and* does): when *nor* or *or* is used the subject closer to the verb determines the number of the verb. Whether the subject comes before or after the verb doesn't matter; the proximity determines the number.

- 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?

The words *there* and *here* are never subjects.

- There **are** two reasons [plural subject] for this.
- There **is** no reason for this.
- Here **are** two apples.

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

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.

He loves and she loves and they loves and

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

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.

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).

- My glasses **were** on the bed.
- My pants **were** torn.
- A pair of plaid trousers **is** in the closet.

Some words end in *-s* and appear to be plural but are really singular and require singular verbs.

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

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

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

- 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.

Fractional expressions such as *half of*, *a part of*, *a percentage of*, *a majority of* are sometimes singular and sometimes plural, depending on the meaning. (The same is true, of course, when *all*, *any*, *more*, *most* and *some* act as subjects.) Sums and products of mathematical processes are expressed as singular and require singular verbs..

- 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.