

# Subject and Verb Agreement Rules

**1. Subjects and verbs must have the same number. Thus, a singular subject requires a singular verb form, and a plural subject requires a plural verb form.**

The girl *plays* the clarinet. The dogs *bark*.

**2. Don't let words that come between the subject and verb affect agreement.**

The various types of drama *were* not discussed. Jerome, the third baseman, *is* the best player on our team. The price of those shoes *is* too high.

**3. Don't be confused when the following prepositions or prepositional clusters occur between the subject and verb—*besides, including, along with, as well as, in addition to, together with*.**

The coach, along with the players, *protests* the decision. The biology teacher, in addition to some parents, *is taking* the bus to the science museum with the class. The accountant as well as his office manager *is attending* the conference in Seattle.

**4. Although the subject of a sentence usually occurs at or near the beginning of a sentence, remember that this is not always the case.**

Under the front porch *sleeps* the little puppy. (“puppy” is subject)  
In a little valley near a quiet stream was a cluster of homes. (“cluster” is subject)

**5. In sentences beginning with “there” or “here,” the subject will follow the verb. Take care to identify the subject before deciding which verb form to use. Remember “there” and “here” can never be subjects.**

There *is* an abundance of azaleas in the back garden this spring. Here *are* the keys to your car.

**6. In a question, where the usual subject-verb word order is not followed, be careful to find the subject before deciding which verb form to use.**

*Was* the bus on time? *Do* mother and dad really *want* to renew their marriage vows this spring?  
*Is* there a purpose to this assignment? *Does* James always *work* so efficiently? Where *are* my shoes? *Are* Jim and his sister at home? *Was* Mary *planning* to enter the competition?

**7. Subjects joined by “and” usually take a plural verb.**

The cook and the waitresses *are asking* for a raise. My sister and her children *were swimming* all afternoon.

## Exceptions to #7 above:

**a. If the two subjects refer to the same person or thing, the verb is singular.**

The owner and manager of the 7-Eleven on the corner *was robbed* last night. Sue's friend and advisor *was surprised* by her decision. Macaroni and cheese *is* my favorite Friday night dinner. Peanut butter and jelly *was* always my son's favorite sandwich. Spaghetti and meatballs *is* the specialty of the house in this Italian restaurant. Strawberries and cream *was added* to the menu.

**b. If words like *each, every, many a, or no* come before the subject, the verb is singular:**

Every boy and girl at the party *was given* a present to take home. Each envelope and piece of paper *has* the name of the company on it. Each dog and each cat *has been immunized*. No talking and no laughing *is permitted* in the library.

**8. An infinitive used as a subject of a sentence takes the singular form of the verb. However, two infinitives joined by “and” take the plural form of the verb.**

To be a good husband *was* Jim's ambition. In basketball, to dribble well and to shoot accurately *require* practice.

**9. A gerund that is used as the subject of a sentence takes the singular form of the verb. (*Gerunds* are “ing” words that function as nouns, not verbs.) However, two gerunds linked by “and” take the plural form of the verb.**

Saddling the wild horse *was* no easy task for the cowboy. Tuning the engine on this old car *requires* patience. The juggling of family obligations and career responsibilities *makes* college difficult for many students. Preparing a resume and interviewing with prospective employers *are* two important steps in the job-hunting process. Collecting antique jewelry and playing the banjo *are* my hobbies.

**10. Sometimes for stylistic purposes or simply for the sake of variety, the parts of the verb may be separated; make sure you can find the subject.**

*Perching* in the moonlight on the tall tree branch *was* an old owl. (owl [subject] was perching [verb])

*Running* down the street *were* two police officers. (officers [subject] were running [verb])

*Enclosed* within the fenced yard *were* two ferocious dogs. (dogs [subject] were enclosed [verb])

*Carried* by the wind *was* the old man’s battered hat. (hat [subject] was carried [verb])

**11. Don’t be confused by an introductory prepositional or verbal phrase that precedes the main clause and is usually set off with a comma. The subject and the verb will be found in the independent clause.**

On the front porch of the old wooden shack near the seashore, the young girl *sits* quietly and *thinks* about her future.

Enticed by the promise of a big raise, my brother *has decided* to take the new position with the aerospace firm in Oregon.

Determined to pass all his final exams, my brother *is studying* every night at the library.

**12. Indefinite pronouns like *each, either, neither, one, no one, nothing, nobody, anyone, anything, anybody, everyone, everything, everybody, someone, something, and somebody* usually take singular verbs.**

Each of the hunters *wears* a red jacket. Everybody on patrol tonight *needs* to be on high alert.

Neither of the women *has* a reliable car. Anyone *is permitted* to participate in the race.

**13. Some indefinite pronouns are always plural (*both, few, many, several*).**

Both *were* at fault in the opinion of the army general. Many of my classmates *are going* on the trip to Mexico.

**14. Noun and pronoun subjects like *all, any, most, none, more, part, some, half, one-half, two-thirds, a lot of* may take either a singular or plural verb, depending on the prepositional phrase that follows them. (This is the only circumstance in which the object of the preposition is ever considered.)**

All of the pie *is gone*. All of the cookies *are gone*. None of the oil from the car *has dripped* onto your driveway. Some of the cake *was eaten*. Some of the puzzle’s pieces *were found* in the closet. Most of the movie *was* boring.

**15. In general, use a singular verb with collective nouns regarded as a unit. (Examples of common collective nouns are *audience, jury, senate, public, council, crowd, family, class, board, assembly, committee, panel, orchestra, group, herd, swarm, flock*)**

The team *plays* well after a good night’s sleep. (*team* refers to the whole group)

The jury *has been deliberating* for two days. (*jury* refers to the whole group)

**Exception to #15: Use the plural form of the verb if the collective noun refers to individuals in a group.**

The majority of the students *were studying* in the computer lab. (“majority” refers to many individual students)

The faculty *are expecting* their pay raises in the spring. (“faculty” refers to all the individual members of the faculty, not to the group as a whole)

**16. Note this special rule for the word “number” when it is used as the subject of a sentence. The phrase “the number” is treated as singular; the phrase “a number” is treated as plural.**

The number of employees *has decreased* this year. (*number* regarded as a unit)

A number of employees *are being fired* this year. (*number* refers to many individual employees)

**17. Subjects joined by *or, nor, either/or, neither/nor, and not only/but also* are handled in the following manner:**

**a. If the subjects are both singular, the verb is singular.**

Julie or Tisha *is* responsible for baking the birthday cake. Neither the doll nor the tea set *is* too expensive.

**b. If the subjects are plural, the verb is plural.**

Roses or geraniums *are going* to be planted under the picture window in the front yard. Neither the students nor the teachers *were impressed* by his comments.

**c. If one subject is singular and one plural, the verb is matched with the nearer subject:**

Neither Daniel nor his brothers *plan* to go deep-sea fishing this morning. Neither his brothers nor Daniel *plans* to go deep-sea fishing this morning. *Does* Joe or his friends *want* some pizza? *Do* your sisters or Joe *want* some pizza?

**\*\*Good Shortcut\*\***--For rule #17 above, just look at the subject closest to the verb. If the subject is singular, choose the singular form of the verb; if the subject is plural, choose the plural form of the verb.

**18. Some nouns that end in “s” are singular in meaning and take singular verbs (e.g., *news, civics, measles, diabetes, AIDS, gymnastics, aerobics, electronics, statistics, ethics, physics, and politics*). Also, titles of books, movies, short stories, newspaper and magazine articles, poems, and plays may be plural in form but are considered singular in number. The names of some businesses, geographical entities, and words referred to as words are treated similarly.**

Statistics *is* not being offered this semester. *The Birds* *is* one of Alfred Hitchcock’s most well-known thrillers. *The Wings of the Dove*, a complex novel by Henry James, *was* recently *shown* on network television. Finkle Brothers *has* a sale this week. The Philippines *has* a tropical climate. “Homo sapiens” is often misspelled.

**19. A relative pronoun (*who, whom, which, that*) used as the subject of a clause takes a singular or plural verb depending on its antecedent. In other words, you must know which word the pronoun refers to before you decide which verb to use.**

Every volunteer who *works* tonight must wear safety glasses. I bought the peach that *was* ripe. I bought the peaches that *were* ripe. The boy who *is coming* to the party is my best friend. Anything that parents *tell* their children usually gets ignored. She is a competent employee who *is expected* to succeed.

**Note:** For phrases like “one of the students who” or “one of the things that,” logic must dictate. (A phrase with “only one” takes a singular verb.)

**20. When units of measurement for distance, time, volume, height, weight, money, etc. are used as subjects, they usually take the singular verb form.**

Two teaspoons of sugar *was* all that the cake recipe called for. Four pounds of rice *seems* to be more than we really need. Five dollars *is* too much to pay for a hot dog.

**21. Only the subject affects the form of the verb.**

My dog’s biggest problem in this hot weather *is* fleas.

**Sources:**

Glazier, Teresa. *The Least You Should Know about English: Writing Skills, Form B*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Hogue, Ann. *The Essentials of English: A Writer’s Handbook*. NY: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003.

Langan, John, and Janet M. Goldstein. *English Brushup*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Mapp, Larry. *Harbrace College Workbook: Form 12A*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Mapp, Larry. *Harbrace College Workbook: Form 12B*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1995.

Wilson, Paige, and Teresa F. Glazier. *The Least You Should Know about English: Writing Skills, Form A*. 9<sup>th</sup>ed. Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.

