Subject-Verb Agreement

Quick Checks for Subject-Verb Agreement
1. Identify the subject and verb that go together. Are they consistent in their agreement?
2. Identify any compound subjects. If they are connected by and, they take a plural verb. If they are connected by or or nor, the verb must agree with the part of speech of the subject closest to the verb.
3. Identify any collective-noun subjects. If the nouns refer to a group as one, they take a singular verb. If the nouns refer to multiple individuals of a group, they take a plural verb.
4. Identify any indefinite-pronoun subjects. They usually take a singular verb.

Third-Person Singular Subjects
For a present-tense verb to agree with a third-person singular subject, add –s or –es to the base form of the verb.

Examples: The painter moves his brush across the canvas
Smoking causes many health issues.
Mike wants to see a movie.

For a present-tense verb to agree with any other subject, use the base form of the verb.

Examples: I want to see a movie.
They want to see a movie.

Have and be do not fall under the –s or –es rule with third-person singular subjects. Have becomes has; be becomes is, are, was, or were.

Examples: Cheating is wrong.
They have pancakes, and he has pancakes.

Compound Subjects
When two or more nouns and/or pronouns compose a subject and are connected by and, use a plural verb.

Examples: Cats and dogs are my favorite animals.
My mother and father enjoy my drama performances.
When two or more singular nouns or pronouns are connected by or or nor, use a singular verb.

**Example:** The cat or dog is responsible for the mess.

When a compound subject contains a singular and a plural noun or pronoun, the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is nearer the verb.

**Example:** The cat or dogs are responsible for the mess.

When two or more singular subjects are connected by either/or or neither/nor, the verb is singular.

**Example:** Either the cat or dog is responsible for the mess.

When two or more plural subjects are connected by either/or or neither/nor, the verb is plural.

**Example:** Flowers or bushes are a good choice for your garden.

**Subjects and Verbs Separated by Other Words**
Be careful if a prepositional phrase comes between the subject and the verb. Remember that the verb agrees with the subject, not a pronoun or noun in the phrase.

**Examples:** The study on magnets is informative.

The boxes of chocolates in the fridge taste delicious.

Expressions such as with, together with, along with, including, as well as, accompanied by, in addition to, or as well do not change the quantity of the subject. If the subject is singular, the verb is too.

**Example:** Sarah, as well as her business partner, was exhausted after the trip.

**Collective-Noun Subjects**
Collective nouns refer to a group. They usually take singular verbs, but it depends on whether they refer to the group as a single unit or to the multiple members of the group.
Example: The family *includes* many aunts, uncles, and cousins.

**Indefinite-Pronoun Subjects**
Indefinite pronouns do not refer to specific things or persons. Most take a singular verb form. Refer to the following lists that categorize them as singular or plural.

**Singular Indefinite Pronouns**
The following singular indefinite pronouns take a singular verb: either, neither, everyone, everybody, nobody, anyone, anybody, somebody, someone, each, each one, no one.

**Examples:**
- Neither of the couches *is* comfortable.
- Everybody *knows* who the president is.
- Somebody *needs* to come help out.

**Plural Indefinite Pronouns**
The following plural indefinite pronouns take a plural verb: several, many, others, few, both.

**Examples:**
- The others *are* walking to the next station.
- Few people *plan* to attend the destination wedding.

**Oddities**
Some words that end in –s look plural but have a singular meaning. The following nouns are singular, so you must use a singular verb: mathematics, dollars, news, measles, and civics.

**Examples:**
- Mathematics *is* my favorite subject.
- The news *is* on at seven.

Some of these nouns that fit this description may be either singular or plural, depending on context.

**Examples:**
- *Singular:* Politics *is* a topic I enjoy talking about, except at the dinner table.
- *Plural:* His politics *are* a little crazy.

The word *dollars* is a special case. When talking about an amount of money, it requires a singular verb, but when referring to the dollars themselves, a plural verb is required.

**Examples:**
- Ten dollars *is* too much money.
- In my dream, dollars *were* falling off trees.
Nouns such as tweezers, shears, trousers, pants, chopsticks, glasses, and scissors require plural verbs.

**Examples:** My new pants *are* office appropriate.
Chopsticks *are* fun to eat with.
Those scissors *are* dull.

**Activity**
Determine whether each sentence has subject-verb agreement and explain why.

1. Bob, in addition to John, *are* going to the park.
2. Each of the plays depicts a strong moral lesson.
3. My passion *are* stamps.
4. Next to the windmill *stands* silos filled with grain.
5. Of the two applicants, *neither* has much promise.
6. The news are on at 8 p.m.
7. A diet full of fruits and vegetables *is* a healthy one.
8. The bird or cats *are* responsible.
9. They lives across town.
10. Fifty dollars *is* too much money, and I wish dollars *were* falling off trees.

**Answer Key for Activity**

1. Incorrect. Bob is the only subject, so the verb should be *is*.
2. Correct. The verb is singular because the sentence refers to each play, singular.
3. Incorrect. The verb should be *is* because passion is the subject, not stamps.
4. Incorrect. The verb should be *stand* because the word silos is the subject, not windmill.
5. Correct. Neither indicates that the sentence refers to each applicant.
6. Incorrect. News is a singular noun, so it takes a singular verb.
7. Correct. Diet is singular, so it takes a singular verb. Fruits and vegetables are not the subjects of the sentence.
8. Correct. Even though bird and cats are connected by or, cats is plural and closest to the verb, so the verb must be plural also.
9. Incorrect. The verb should be live because the word they is the subject, and it is plural.
10. Correct. In the first clause, dollars is a singular noun, but in the second clause, dollars is plural.