

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.