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.