

Subject-Verb Agreement

Basic Principle: Singular subjects need singular verbs; plural subjects need plural verbs. My **brother is** a nutritionist. My **sisters are** mathematicians.

1. 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 often doesn't matter whether you use a singular or a plural verb — unless something else in the sentence determines its number. (Writers generally think of none as meaning *not any* and will choose a plural verb, as in "None of the engines are working," but when something else makes us regard none as meaning *not one*, we want a singular verb, as in "None of the food is fresh.")

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.

2. Some indefinite pronouns are particularly troublesome **Everyone** and **everybody** (listed above, also) certainly *feel* like more than one person and, therefore, students are sometimes tempted to use a plural verb with them. They are always singular, though. **Each** is often followed by a prepositional phrase ending in a plural word (Each of the cars), thus confusing the verb choice. *Each*, too, is always singular and requires 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.

3. 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.

4. The pronouns *neither* and *either* are singular and require singular verbs even though they

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?

Because a sentence like "Neither my brothers nor my father is going to sell the house" sounds peculiar, it is probably a good idea to put the plural subject closer to the verb whenever that is possible.

6. 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.

7. 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 love and . . .

8. 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.

9. Sometimes nouns take weird forms and can fool us into thinking they're plural when they're really singular and vice-versa. Consult the section on the **Plural Forms of Nouns** and the section on **Collective Nouns** for additional help. 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.

10. 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.

11. Sometimes a noun is singular but has a plural form that is used as a singular.

Four times four divided by two **is** eight.

12. If your sentence compounds a positive and a negative subject and one is plural, the other singular, the verb should agree with the positive subject.

The department members but not the chair **have decided** not to teach on Valentine's Day.

It is not the faculty members but the president who **decides** this issue.

It was the speaker, not his ideas, that **has provoked** the students to riot.