

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 take singular verbs.

- Everyone **has** done his or her homework.
- Somebody **has left** her purse.

Some indefinite pronouns -- such as *all, many, more, most, some, none* -- are singular or plural depending on what they're referring to. (Is the thing referred to countable or not?)

- Some of the beads **are** missing.
- Some of the water **is** gone.

2

Everyone and **everybody** are always singular. **Each** is often followed by a prepositional phrase ending in a plural word (*Each of the cars*), which can be confusing. *Each* is always singular and requires a singular verb.

- Everyone **has** finished his or her homework.
- Each of the students **is** responsible for doing his or her work in the library.

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 make the subjects compound (as the word *and* would do).

- The mayor, as well as his brothers, **is** going to prison.

4

The pronouns *neither* and *either* are singular and require singular verbs even though they seem to be referring to two things.

- Neither of the two traffic lights **is** working.
- Which shirt do you want? Either **is** fine with me.

Neither and *either* sometimes take a plural verb when they are followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with *of*.

- Have either of you two clowns read the assignment?
- Are either of you taking this seriously?

5

When *nor* or *or* is used, the subject closer to the verb determines whether the verb is singular or plural. It doesn't matter whether the subject comes before or after the verb.

- Either my father or my brothers **are** going to sell the house.
- Neither my brothers nor my father **is** going to sell the house.

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.

Even though the subject follows the verb, it 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 dogs. They love cats. It is raining.

8

Sometimes modifiers will get between a subject and its verb, but don't let these modifiers 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 fool us into thinking they're singular when they're really plural.

Words such as *glasses*, *pants*, *pliers*, and *scissors* require plural verbs unless they're preceded by the phrase *pair of* (then *pair* becomes the subject and is singular).

- 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.

- The news from Darfur **is** bad.
- Measles **is** a dangerous disease for pregnant women.

11

Fractional expressions such as *half of*, *a part of*, *a percentage of*, *a majority of* are sometimes singular and sometimes plural, depending on the meaning. (But the expression "more than one" is singular: "More than one student has tried this.")

- Two-fifths of the troops **were** lost in the battle.
- Two-fifths of the vineyard **was** destroyed by fire.
- Forty percent of the students **are** in favor of changing the policy.
- Forty percent of the student body **is** in favor of changing the policy.

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 Friday.
- It is not the faculty members but the president who **decides** this issue.
- It was the speaker, not his ideas, who **has provoked** the students to riot.