You should read this chapter if you need to review or learn about

- The grammatical subject of “agreement”
- Making subjects and verbs agree
- Making pronouns and antecedents agree
- Crafting smooth, logical sentences

Get Started

Agreement means that sentence parts match. Subjects must agree with verbs, and pronouns must agree with antecedents. If they don’t, your sentences will sound awkward and may confuse your listeners and readers.
Like Peas in a Pod

Romeo and Juliet
Spaghetti and meatballs
Peanut butter and jelly
The birds and the bees

Some things just seem to go together well. We carry this concept over into grammar by matching all sentence parts. This matching of sentence elements is called agreement. It helps you create smooth and logical sentences.

The basic rule of sentence agreement is simple: A subject must agree with its verb in number. Number means singular or plural.

- A singular subject names one person, place, thing, or idea.
- A plural subject names more than one person, place, thing, or idea.

Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular Subjects</th>
<th>Plural Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person:</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place:</td>
<td>beach</td>
<td>beaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thing:</td>
<td>desk</td>
<td>desks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea:</td>
<td>freedom</td>
<td>freedoms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Singular and plural nouns

In English, the plurals of most nouns are formed by adding -s or -es to the singular form. For example: bike → bikes; race → races; inch → inches. Some nouns have irregular plurals, such as mouse → mice; woman → women, goose → geese. You can find the plural forms of irregular nouns in a dictionary.

2. Singular and plural pronouns

Pronouns have singular and plural forms, too. Study the following chart.
3. Singular and plural verbs
   As with nouns and pronouns, verbs show singular and plural forms. There are two areas in which you may have difficulty identifying singular and plural forms of nouns: the basic present tense and tenses using the Helping verb *to be*.

   As you study the following chart, notice that the form of the verb changes only in the third-person singular column, the middle column. Find the -s or -es added to the verb. That’s the tricky part:
   - Singular verbs end in -s or -es.
   - Plural nouns end in -s or -es.

   Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First and Second Person</th>
<th>Singular Third Person</th>
<th>Plural First, Second, Third Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I, you) begin</td>
<td>(he, she, it) begins</td>
<td>(we, you, they) begin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I, you) do</td>
<td>(he, she, it) does</td>
<td>(we, you, they) do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   As you can see from this chart, subject-verb agreement is most difficult to determine in the present tense.

4. Singular and plural forms of *be*
   The form of the helping verb *be* may also help you determine whether a verb is singular or plural. The following chart shows the forms of *be* that are different from singular to plural.

   **Be Used as a Helping Verb**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am</td>
<td>(we) are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(he, she, it) is</td>
<td>(they) are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I, he, she, it) was</td>
<td>(we, they) were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(he, she, it) has been</td>
<td>(they) have been</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A Singular Subject Must Have a Singular Verb**

Now that you can recognize singular and plural nouns, pronouns, and verbs, you will be able to make all sentence parts agree in number. Remember the rule introduced in the beginning of this chapter: *A subject must agree with its verb in number.*
All the other rules follow from this one. The easiest rules are these two:

- A singular subject must have a singular verb.
- A plural subject must have a plural verb.

Let’s examine the first rule.

5. A singular subject must have a singular verb.

She \textit{hesitates} at all intersections, making the other drivers angry.

\textbf{sing. subject sing. verb}

The singular subject \textit{she} agrees with the singular verb \textit{hesitates}.

\textit{Procrastination} \textit{is} the art of keeping up with yesterday.

\textbf{sing. subject sing. verb}

The singular subject \textit{procrastination} agrees with the singular verb \textit{is}.

\textit{I} \textit{am} ready for dinner now.

\textbf{sing. subject sing. verb}

The singular subject \textit{I} requires the singular verb \textit{am}.

6. Two or more singular subjects joined by \textit{or} or \textit{nor} must have a singular verb.

This makes perfect sense: You are making a choice between two singular subjects. The \textit{or} shows that you are only choosing one.

Either the dog \textit{or} the cat \textit{has} to go.

\textbf{sing. subject or sing. subject sing. verb}

Only one pet will go—the dog or the cat. Therefore, you will only have one pet left. Two singular subjects—\textit{dog} and \textit{cat}—joined by \textit{or} take the singular verb \textit{has}.

Neither Elvis Costello \textit{nor} Elvis Presley \textit{is} in the room.

\textbf{sing. subject nor sing. subject sing. verb}

Each subject is being treated individually. Therefore, two singular subjects—\textit{Elvis Costello} and \textit{Elvis Presley}—joined by \textit{nor} take the singular verb \textit{is}.

7. Subjects that are singular in meaning but plural in form require a singular verb.

These subjects include words such as \textit{measles, civics, social studies, mumps, molasses, news, economics,} and \textit{mathematics}.

The \textit{news} \textit{is} on every night at 11:00 P.M.

\textbf{sing. subject sing. verb}

The singular subject \textit{news} takes the singular verb \textit{is}.

8. Plural subjects that function as a single unit take a singular verb.

\textit{Spaghetti and meatballs} \textit{is} my favorite dish.

\textbf{sing. subject sing. verb}

The singular subject \textit{spaghetti and meatballs} requires the singular verb \textit{is}.

\textit{Bacon and eggs} \textit{makes} a great late night snack.

\textbf{sing. subject sing. verb}

The singular subject \textit{bacon and eggs} agrees with the singular verb \textit{makes}. 
9. Titles are always singular.
   It doesn’t matter how long the title is, what it names, or whether or not it sounds plural—a title always takes a singular verb.
   *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a story about the Spanish Civil War.

   sing. subject  sing. verb
   The singular title *For Whom the Bell Tolls* requires the singular verb *is*.

   sing. subject  sing. verb
   The singular title *Stranger in a Strange Land* was written by Robert Heinlein.

   sing. subject  sing. verb
   The singular title *Stranger in a Strange Land* requires the singular verb *was*.

   Most measurements are singular—even though they look plural. For example: “*Half a dollar is* more than enough” (not “*are* more than enough”).

### A Plural Subject Must Have a Plural Verb

Just as a singular subject requires a singular verb, so a plural subject requires a plural verb. Here are some examples:

1. A plural subject must have a plural verb.
   *Men* are from Earth. *Women* are from Earth. Deal with it.

   plural   plural   plural   plural
   subject  verb    subject  verb
   The plural subject *men* requires the plural verb *are*. The plural subject *women* requires the plural verb *are*.

   On average, *people* fear spiders more than *they* do death.

   plural   plural   plural   plural
   subject  verb    subject  verb
   The plural subject *people* requires the plural verb *fear* (not the singular verb *fears*). The plural subject *they* requires the plural verb *do* (not the singular verb *does*).

   *Students* at U.S. colleges *read* about 60,000 pages in four years.

   plural   plural
   subject  verb
   The plural subject *students* requires the plural verb *read* (not the singular verb *reads*).

   *Facetious and abstemious contain* all the vowels in the correct order, as does arsenious, meaning “containing arsenic.”

   The plural subject *facetious and abstemious* requires the plural verb *contain* (not the singular verb *contains*.) Think of the conjunction *and* as a plus sign. Whether the parts of the subject joined by *and* are singular or plural (or both), they all add up to a plural subject and so require a plural verb.
2. Two or more plural subjects joined by *or* or *nor* must have a plural verb.

This is the logical extension of the rule you learned earlier about two or more singular subjects joined by *or* or *nor* taking a singular verb. Here, since both subjects are plural, the verb must be plural as well.

Either the *children* or *the adults* *are* clearing the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>plural</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since both subjects are plural, one of them alone is still plural. Therefore, two plural subjects—*children* and *adults*—joined by *or* take the plural verb *are*.

Neither my *relatives* *nor* my *friends* *are* leaving any time soon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>plural</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since both subjects are plural, one of them alone is still plural. Therefore, two plural subjects—*relatives* and *friends*—joined by *nor* take the plural verb *are*.

3. A compound subject joined by *and* is plural and must have a plural verb.

The conjunction *and* acts like a plus (+) sign, showing that $1 + 1 = 2$ (or $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, etc.).

Brownies and ice cream are a spectacular dessert.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brownies and ice cream = two desserts. $1 + 1 = 2$. Therefore, the verb must be plural: *are*.

Nina and Christopher have donated money to charity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nina and Christopher = two people. $1 + 1 = 2$. Therefore, the verb must be plural: *have*.

4. If two or more singular and plural subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*, the subject closest to the verb determines agreement.

This is basically an exception made for the sake of sound: It sounds better to match the verb to the closer subject.

*Margery or the twins* *are* coming on the trip to Seattle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>plural</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the plural subject *twins* is closest to the verb, the verb is plural: *are*.

The *twins or Margery* *is* coming on the trip to Seattle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>sing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the singular subject *Margery* is closest to the verb, the verb is singular: *is*.

**Collective Nouns and Indefinite Pronouns**

A *collective noun* names a group of people or things. Collective nouns include the words *class, committee, flock, herd, team, audience, assembly, team, and club*. Collective nouns can be singular or plural, depending on how they are used in a sentence. Here are the basic guidelines:
A collective noun is considered *singular* when it functions as a single unit. Collective nouns used as one unit take a singular verb.

A collective noun is considered *plural* when the group it identifies is considered to be individuals. Collective nouns that indicate many units take a plural verb.

Here are some examples:

The *team* *has practiced* for tonight’s big game for months.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>sing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The singular subject *team* agrees with the singular verb *has practiced* because in this instance, the team functions as one (singular) group.

The *team* *have practiced* for tonight’s big game for months.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subject *team* becomes plural because each member of the group is now being considered as an individual.

*Indefinite pronouns*, like collective nouns, can be singular or plural, depending on how they are used in a sentence. Indefinite pronouns refer to people, places, objects, or things without pointing to a specific one. Indefinite pronouns include words such as *everyone, someone, all*, and *more*.

- Singular indefinite pronouns take a singular verb.
- Plural indefinite pronouns take a plural verb.

The following chart shows singular and plural indefinite pronouns. The chart also shows pronouns that can be either singular or plural, depending on how they are used in a sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular or Plural</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>another</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anybody</td>
<td>few</td>
<td>any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anyone</td>
<td>many</td>
<td>more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anything</td>
<td>others</td>
<td>most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>each</td>
<td>several</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>either</td>
<td></td>
<td>some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everybody</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everything</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>many a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Continues*
Look back at the chart. You will see that the following patterns emerge:

1. Indefinite pronouns that end in -body are always singular. These words include anybody, somebody, nobody.
2. Indefinite pronouns that end in -one are always singular. These words include anyone, everyone, someone, and one.
3. The indefinite pronouns both, few, many, others, and several are always plural.
4. The indefinite pronouns all, any, more, most, none, and some can be singular or plural, depending on how they are used.

Here are some examples:

One of the gerbils is missing.

sing.    sing.
subject  verb

The singular subject one requires the singular verb is.

Both of the gerbils are missing.

plural  plural
subject  verb

The plural subject both requires the plural verb are.

All of the beef stew was devoured.

sing.    sing.
subject  verb
In this instance, *all* is being used to indicate one unit. As a result, it requires the singular verb *was.*

*Many* of the guests *are* sick of Tedious Ted’s endless chatter.

The plural subject *many* requires the plural verb *are.*

## Special Problems in Agreement

The rules for agreement are straightforward, but some thorny problems do arise. Here are the two most challenging issues: hard-to-find subjects and intervening phrases.

1. **Identify hard-to-find subjects.**
   
   Some subjects can be harder to find than others. Subjects that come before the verb are especially tricky. However, a subject must still agree in number with its verb, as the following examples show:

   In the bottom of the lake *are* two old *cars.*

   The plural subject *cars* agrees with the plural verb *are.*

   There *were* still half a dozen *tires* in the lake, too.

   The plural subject *tires* requires the plural verb *were.*

2. **Ignore intervening phrases.**

   Disregard words or phrases that come between the subject and the verb. A phrase or clause that comes between a subject and its verb does not affect subject-verb agreement.

   The strongest *muscle* in the body is the tongue.

   The singular subject *muscle* agrees with the singular verb *is.* Ignore the intervening prepositional phrase “in the body.”

   The captain of the guards *stands* at the door of Buckingham Palace.

   The singular subject *captain* agrees with the singular verb *stands.* Ignore the intervening prepositional phrase “of the guards.”

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**Quick Tip**

The words *there or here* at the beginning of a sentence often signal inverted word order.