

## What is subject-verb agreement?

Subject-verb agreement means that a subject and its verb must be both singular or both plural:

- A singular subject takes a singular verb
- A plural subject takes a plural verb

In the following examples, first identify the subject and verb, then see if the verb agrees with the subject in being singular or plural.

1. *John live in France.*
2. *John lives in France.*
3. *The arguments is sound and well supported.*
4. *The arguments are sound and well supported.*

### Analysis

Sentence 2 is correct because the subject **John** (singular 'he') 'agrees with' the third person singular form of the verb *to live* - **lives**. Sentence 1 is incorrect because the subject is singular while the verb **live** is plural.

Similarly, Sentence 4 is correct and Sentence 3 incorrect because the subject **arguments** (plural 'they') requires the third person plural form of the verb *to be* - **are**.

## Five rules about subject-verb agreement

In the examples below, the subject of each sentence is in **bold**. It can be useful to consider what pronoun could perform the same function as the subject; this is shown in brackets where applicable.

1. **Singular subjects joined by the word and are generally plural.**

**Both the Art teacher and the students** (They) enjoy a student-centered approach.

2. **Indefinite pronouns** (someone, anyone, no one, anybody, somebody, nobody, one, either, neither) **usually take a singular verb.**

**No one** likes to fail at university.

3. **Nouns used with a quantifier** (some, any, all, most) **can be singular or plural. This depends on whether the noun is countable or uncountable.**

**Some of the policies** (They) were rejected whilst others were approved. (policies = plural countable noun)

**Some of the research** (It) was conducted at the University of Melbourne. (research = uncountable noun)

4. After a subject joined by **either ... or**, **neither ... nor**, or **not only ... but also**, the verb agrees with the subject nearest to it.

*Neither the lecturer nor the students want to reschedule the class.* (want agrees with students)

5. **There is** and **there are** agree with the noun that follows.

*There is flexibility in this kind of management structure.*

## Final tips

In your reading and writing, practise identifying the subject and verb of a sentence. If the subject is a singular or uncountable noun, then the verb must be singular. If the subject is plural, then the verb must be plural, too.

Most subject-verb agreement mistakes can be detected and fixed if you spend some time editing your writing with this focus in mind.