

# Subject-Verb Agreement

**Basic Rule.** A singular subject (*she, Bill, car*) takes a singular verb (*is, goes, shines*), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

**Example:** *The list of items is/are on the desk.*

If you know that *list* is the subject, then you will choose *is* for the verb.

## **Exceptions to the Basic rule:**

a. The first person pronoun *I* takes a plural verb (*I go, I drive*).

b. The basic form of the verb is used after certain main verbs such as *watch, see, hear, feel, help, let, and make*. (*He watched Ronaldo score the winning goal*).

**Rule 1.** A subject will come before a phrase beginning with *of*. This is a key rule for understanding subjects. The word *of* is the culprit in many, perhaps most, subject-verb mistakes.

Hasty writers, speakers, readers, and listeners might miss the all-too-common mistake in the following sentence:

**Incorrect:** *A bouquet of yellow roses lend color and fragrance to the room.*

**Correct:** *A bouquet of yellow roses lends . . . (bouquet lends, not roses lend)*

**Rule 2.** Two singular subjects connected by *or, either/or, or neither/nor* require a singular verb.

## **Examples:**

*My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today.*

*Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.*

*Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.*

**Rule 3.** The verb in an *or*, *either/or*, or *neither/nor* sentence agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it.

**Examples:**

*Neither the plates nor the serving bowl goes on that shelf.*

*Neither the serving bowl nor the plates go on that shelf.*

This rule can lead to bumps in the road. For example, if *I* is one of two (or more) subjects, it could lead to this odd sentence:

**Awkward:** *Neither she, my friends, nor I am going to the festival.*

If possible, it's best to reword such grammatically correct but awkward sentences.

**Better:**

*Neither she, I, nor my friends are going to the festival.*

**OR**

*She, my friends, and I are not going to the festival.*

**Rule 4.** As a general rule, use a plural verb with two or more subjects when they are connected by *and*.

**Example:** *A car and a bike are my means of transportation.*

But note these exceptions:

**Exceptions:**

*Breaking and entering is against the law.*

*The bed and breakfast was charming.*

In those sentences, *breaking and entering* and *bed and breakfast* are compound nouns.

**NOTE:-** Some think it is incorrect to place a personal pronoun first in a multi-subject sentence.

**Examples:**

*I, my dad, and my step-mom are going to the movies.*

*She and Orville bought a dog.*

While not grammatically incorrect per se, it is a courtesy to place the pronoun last, except when awkward to do so as shown under **Rule 3** above.

**Rule 5a.** Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by such words as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, *not*, etc. These words and phrases are not part of the subject. Ignore them and use a singular verb when the subject is singular.

**Examples:**

*The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.*

*Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.*

**Rule 5b.** Parentheses are not part of the subject.

**Example:** *Joe (and his trusty mutt) was always welcome.*

If this seems awkward, try rewriting the sentence.

**Rule 6.** In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the true subject follows the verb.

**Examples:**

*There are four hurdles to jump.*

*There is a high hurdle to jump.*

*Here are the keys.*

**NOTE:**The word *there's*, a contraction of *there is*, leads to bad habits in informal sentences like *There's a lot of people here today*, because it's easier to say "there's" than "there are." Take care never to use *there's* with a plural subject.

**Rule 7.** Use a singular verb with distances, periods of time, sums of money, etc., when considered as a unit.

**Examples:**

*Three miles **is** too far to walk.*

*Five years **is** the maximum sentence for that offense.*

*Ten dollars **is** a high price to pay.*

**BUT**

*Ten dollars (i.e., dollar bills) **were** scattered on the floor.*

**Rule 8a.** With words that indicate portions—e.g., *a lot*, *a majority*, *some*, *all*—Rule 1 given earlier in this section is reversed, and we are guided by the noun after *of*. If the noun after *of* is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

**Examples:**

*A lot of the **pie** has disappeared.*

*A lot of the **pies** have disappeared.*

*Fifty percent of the **pie** has disappeared.*

*Fifty percent of the **pies** have disappeared.*

*A **third** of the **city** is unemployed.*

*A **third** of the **people** are unemployed.*

*All of the **pie** is gone.*

*All of the **pies** are gone.*

*Some of the **pie** is missing.*

*Some of the **pies** are missing.*

**NOTE:** Some teachers, editors, and the SAT testing service, perhaps for convenience, have considered *none* to be strictly singular. However, authorities agree that *none* has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. When *none* is clearly intended to mean "not one," it is followed by a singular verb.

**Rule 8b.** With **collective nouns** such as *group, jury, family, audience, population*, the verb might be singular or plural, depending on the writer's intent.

**Examples:**

All of my **family** *has arrived* OR *have arrived*.

Most of the **jury** *is* here OR *are* here.

A **third** of the **population** *was* not in favor OR *were* not in favor of the bill.

**NOTE:** Anyone who uses a plural verb with a collective noun must take care to be accurate—and also consistent. It must not be done carelessly. The following is the sort of flawed sentence one sees and hears a lot these days:

*The staff is deciding how they want to vote.*

Careful speakers and writers would avoid assigning the singular *is* and the plural *they* to *staff* in the same sentence.

**Consistent:** *The staff **are** deciding how **they** want to vote.*

Rewriting such sentences is recommended whenever possible. The preceding sentence would read even better as:

*The staff members are deciding how they want to vote.*

**Rule 9.** The word *were* replaces *was* in sentences that express a wish or are contrary to fact:

**Example:** *If Joe **were** here, you'd be sorry.*

Shouldn't *Joe* be followed by *was*, not *were*, given that *Joe* is singular? But *Joe* isn't actually here, so we say *were*, not *was*. The sentence demonstrates the **subjunctive mood**, which is used to express a hypothetical, wishful, imaginary, or factually contradictory thought. The subjunctive mood pairs singular subjects with what we usually think of as plural verbs.

**Examples:**

*I wish it **were** Friday.*

*She requested that he **raise** his hand.*

*The foreman demanded that Joe **wear** safety goggles.*

In the first example, a wishful statement, not a fact, is being expressed; therefore, *were*, which we usually think of as a plural verb, is used with the singular *it*. (Technically, *it* is the singular subject of the object clause in the subjunctive mood: *it were Friday*.)

Normally, *he raise* would sound terrible to us. However, in the second example, where a request is being expressed, the subjunctive mood is correct.

**Note:** The subjunctive mood is losing ground in spoken English but should still be used in formal speech and writing.