

Subject-Verb Agreement

Introduction

A basic principle of English is that a verb must agree in number with its subject. Although this basic principle is very simple, it is often violated because writers have trouble either identifying the subject or the determining its number.

Singular rule

A **singular subject** requires *a singular verb*.

Consider the following examples.

He *is* happy.

The boy *is* happy.

David *is* happy.

Plural Rule

A **plural subject** requires *a plural verb*.

Consider the following examples.

They *are* happy.

The boys *are* happy.

David and Tom *are* happy.

Identifying the subject

Complex Sentences

By identifying the subject in complex sentences we can tell whether we should use a singular or plural verb.

Here are some example sentences.

The student who wrote the novels *likes* the book cover.

The student who wrote the novels is the subject. The phrase **who wrote the novels** is just describing which student likes the book cover- don't let the modifiers confuse you. Taking the sentence to its basics you can see that **The student likes the book cover.**

The students who wrote the novels *like* the book cover.

The students who wrote the novels is the subject and so the plural verb form **like** is used. Taking the sentence to its basics you can see that **The students like the book cover.**

The best part of the play *was* written by Tom.

The best part of the play is the subject. You can see that the basic sentence is **The best part was written by Tom.**

The best parts of the play *were* written by Tom.

The best parts of the play is the subject. The phrase **of the play** is simply giving additional information. Taking the sentence to its basics you can see **The best parts were written by Tom.**

Parentheticals

When a subject is followed by a parenthetical, or an aside, it is important to remember to make the verb agree in number with the subject and not the parenthetical.

Consider the following.

The manager, together with his loyal assistants, *makes* a formidable opponent.

The phrase **together with his loyal assistants** is a parenthetical. The manager is the subject of the sentence and so the singular form **makes** is required. Compare this with **The manager and his loyal assistants make a fine team.** The phrase and **his loyal assistants** is not an aside. The word **and** makes the subject a compound plural subject and so the plural verb form **make** is required.

The farmer, just like the auctioner, *was* surprised at the outcome.

The farmer is the subject of the sentence. The phrase **just like the auctioneer** is merely an aside. Compare the sentence with **The farmer and the auctioneer were surprised at the outcome**. The phrase **and the auctioneer** is not an aside and so now the subject is plural and the verb must also be plural.

Inverted Subjects

The subject usually precedes the main verb to which it relates. However, sometimes the subject is inverted, meaning that it follows the verb.

Consider the following.

Looking through the fence *were* **three little girls**.

Notice that the basic sentence is really **Three little girls were looking through the fence**. The subject has been inverted for stylistic effect.

There *are* **two good points**. There *is* **one good point**.
Here *are* **two good points**. Here *is* **one good point**.

The words **there** and **here** are never subjects. In these constructions, the subject follows the verb and, as always, the verb must agree in number with the subject.

Subject's Number

Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns are always singular.

Here are some example sentences.

Anyone *looks* good in red.
Anybody *looks* good in red.
Everyone *looks* good in red.
Everybody *looks* good in red.
Someone *looks* good in red.
Somebody *looks* good in red.

No one *looks* good in red.
Nobody *looks* good in red.
Each of those models *looks* good in red.
Neither of those models *looks* good in red.
Either of those models *looks* good in red.

Neither ... nor and Either ... or

In **neither ... nor** and **either ... or** constructions, the verb agrees with the subject that is in closest proximity to the verb.

Here are some example sentences.

Neither the doctors nor **the nurse** *likes* the patient.
Either the children or **the teacher** *hates* the song.

Neither the nurse nor **the doctors** *like* the patient.
Either the teacher or **the children** *hate* the song.

Fractional Constructions

In fractional constructions it is the number of the noun following the fraction that is relevant to determining the number of the verb.

Here are some example sentences.

One half of the **student body** *has* voted.
Twenty percent of the **student body** *has* voted

One half of the **students** *have* voted.
Twenty percent of the **students** *have* voted.

Collective Phrases

When a phrase refers to a group as a whole, the subject is taken as singular and the singular verb form is used. When a phrase refers to individuals within a group, the subject is taken as plural and the plural verb form is used.

Here are some example sentences.

The young couple *runs* every day.
The group *takes* a bus to work.

A couple of boys *run* every day.
A group of girls *take* a bus to work.

Relative Clause Constructions

In relative clause constructions, the noun phrase preceding the relative pronoun, **who**, **which** or **that**, is the subject of the verb following the relative pronoun. As usual, the verb must agree with the subject.

Here are some example sentences.

Amy is **a student** who **takes** great pride in her work.
Amy is one of **those students** who **take** great pride in their work.

That is **a policy** which **relies** on major funding.
That is one of **those policies** which **rely** on major funding.

JCP is **a company** that **pays** its employees well.
JCP is one of **those companies** that **pay** its employees well.

Subject-Verb Agreement quizzes

Try the quizzes below to test your understanding.

Subject-Verb Agreement 1

*The sentences in the following problems have an asterisk in place of either **is**, **are**, **has** or **have**. Replace the asterisk in each sentence with the correct word.*

The designers who developed the project * coming to the meeting.

Either the animators or the designer we have just hired * going to move into the new room.

Everybody voting in that way * rejected the President's statements.

Neither of those pictures * very good.

John and Sue are people who * the right skills.

Chris is the only one of those employees who * filled in the form.

One third of the population * happy.

One third of the people * happy.

Subject-Verb Agreement 2

For each of the following, respond True or False.

The following sentence has a plural subject and would need to be completed with a plural verb.

The secretary, like the manager, ... to take her holidays in July.

- True
- False

The following sentence requires a singular verb such as "is".

The band ... meeting tomorrow.

- True
- False

The following sentence uses the wrong form of the verb.

Each of the children were happy.

- True
- False

The following sentence must be completed with a plural verb "are".

There ... a great collection of bicycles at the museum.

- True
- False

The following sentence requires a singular verb, such as "was".

On the wall ... three huge paintings.

- True
- False

Answers

Subject-Verb Agreement 1

The designers who developed the project **are** coming to the meeting.
(The basic sentence is "The designers **are** coming to the meeting".)

Either the animators or the designer we have just hired **is** going to move into the new room.

(With "either ... or" constructions the verb must agree in number with the nearest subject and the nearest subject is "the designer we have just hired".)

Everybody voting in that way **has** rejected the President's statements.
(The basic sentence is "Everybody **has** rejected the President's statements".)

Neither of those pictures **is** very good.
(The sentence really means "Neither one **is** very good".)

John and Sue are people who **have** the right skills.
(The phrase "John and Sue" forms a plural subject.)

Chris is the only one of those employees who **has** filled in the form.
(Constructions with the phrase "the only one" are singular.)

One third of the population **is** happy.
(Notice that you would say "The population **is** happy".)

One third of the people **are** happy.
(Notice that you would say "The people **are** happy".)

Subject-Verb Agreement 2

The following sentence has a plural subject and would need to be completed with a plural verb.

The secretary, like the manager, ... to take her holidays in July.

- True **X**
- False **✓**

✓ Yes. "The secretary" is the subject; therefore, the sentence does not have a plural subject.

X No. The subject is "the secretary".

The following sentence requires a singular verb such as "is".

The band ... meeting tomorrow.

- True **✓**
- False **X**

✓ That's right. The phrase "the band" is singular.

X No. The phrase "the band" is singular.

The following sentence uses the wrong form of the verb.

Each of the children were happy.

- True **✓**
- False **X**

✓ Correct. The phrase "each of the children" means "each one of the children" and so a singular verb, not a plural one, is required.

X No. The phrase "each of the children" means "each one of the children".

The following sentence must be completed with a plural verb "are".

There ... a great collection of bicycles at the museum.

- True ✗
- False ✓

- ✓ Yes. The subject is singular; there is one collection.
- ✗ No. There is only one collection.

The following sentence requires a singular verb, such as "was".

On the wall ... three huge paintings.

- True ✗
- False ✓

- ✓ Yes. The sentence contains an inverted subject "three huge paintings".
- ✗ No. Be careful. The sentence contains an inverted subject.