



## Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs are said to “agree” when they are *the same in number*. This means that singular nouns must have singular verbs and plural nouns must have plural verbs. This basic principle is easy to demonstrate:

My **brother is** a ballet dancer.

My **sisters are** airline pilots.

Difficulty arises when using words which are confusing in number (eg. everyone, all) and when phrases come between the subject and verb, which make it difficult to determine whether they are singular or plural. To ensure subject-verb agreement, one must correctly identify the subject and verb of the sentence, and then find the form of each which agrees numerically. The examples given below will outline and clarify this process.

### 1. Basic Agreement

**In most sentences the noun and verb are obvious and occur next to each other. The verb is the main word of action or being, and the noun, or subject, is the first word to the verb’s left.**

Sally (noun) loves (verb) cheesecake.

(Sally is a singular noun needing a singular verb. Many singular verbs are formed by adding “-s” or “-es.”)

The students love their teacher.

(The students are a group of people, and most verbs are plural without “-s” or “-es.”)

**The singular or plural forms of being verbs depend on whether the nouns they refer to are singular or plural.**

The rocket (singular noun) shoots (singular verb) into the air.

The rockets (plural noun) shoot (plural verb) into the air.

### 2. Modifying Phrases

**Sometimes phrases beginning with a preposition, gerund, or relative pronoun will come between the subject and the verb and obscure the number of the noun.**

The flock of birds is flying high.

The basket holding ten eggs is on the table.

The woman who sold you the watches is back.

In every case the noun is still singular and the verb form is still the singular “is.” Always look for the word performing the sentence’s main action, and assign it a singular or plural verb as appropriate.

### 3. Special Cases

#### *and*

**If two subjects are joined by “and,” they are considered to function as a group and are given a plural verb.**

The walrus and the polar bear are playing poker.

#### *or, nor*

**If two subjects are joined by “or” or “nor,” the verb should agree with the noun closest to it.**

Either the teacher or the students are here.

Neither the students nor the teacher is here.

#### *who, whom, which, that*

**Relative pronouns are words such as “who,” “whom,” “which,” and “that,” which are found at the beginning of phrases modifying the subject.**

In the explanation above, for example, the phrase beginning with “which” contains two plural verbs (are, found) and modifies the plural noun “pronouns.”

**Relative pronouns are either singular or plural depending upon the words they refer to, which are always the subjects of the sentence. Keep the subjects in agreement with all verbs, including those in relative pronoun phrases.**

#### *someone, somebody, each, either one, everyone, anyone*

**Indefinite pronouns are considered singular and require singular verbs even though sometimes they may convey plural meaning.**

Anyone who wants to pursue higher education has to pass entrance exams.

#### **Words which may be singular or plural**

**Some words may be singular or plural, depending on how they are used. Be aware of which sense is being meant and then assign singular or plural verbs accordingly.**

The jury is sequestered.

(Here we are speaking of the jury as one entity.)

The jury are having an argument.

(Here we are speaking of the jury as a complex of individuals in opposition, and thus use plural verb.)

#### **Miscellaneous words**

**Some words look plural but are really singular or vice versa.**

The news is all a lie.

The data were falsified.