

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement often seems counterintuitive in English because, for example, in the present tense, singular nouns require verbs that end in –s, while plural verbs, including those ending in –s, require verbs with no final –s.

Singular Noun: Ex. **The student studies for an exam.**

Verb with -s

Plural Noun: Ex. **The students study for an exam.**

Noun with -s

In the case of a compound subject, or a subject composed of two or more nouns joined by the conjunction ‘and’, a plural verb should be used.

Ex. **Knowledge and compassion are the foundation of the nursing profession.**

Notice that the above example establishes that two nouns (‘knowledge’ and ‘compassion’) *collectively* become one noun (‘the foundation’), but the plural verb is still used for the compound subject. However, if the joining word used to connect the two nouns in the compound is ‘or’ or ‘nor’, a singular verb should be used.

Ex. **My mother or my father picks me up every day.**

Ex. **Neither the heart nor the liver is functioning properly.**

When a compound subject contains both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by ‘or’ or ‘nor’, the verb should agree with the noun that is closer to the verb.

Ex. **Either the bear or the wolves control this territory.**

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Identifying the Subject

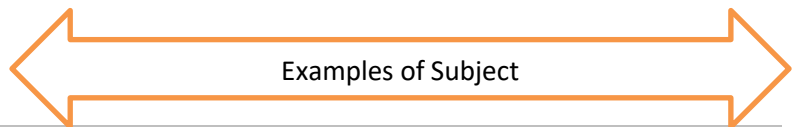
In all of the examples listed above, the *subject noun* is placed directly next to its verb, and so it is rather simple to determine which type of verb to use. However, in some sentences, the *subject* is separated from its verb by additional phrases or clauses. To find the subject in any sentence, simply ask ‘who?’ or ‘what?’ of the verb. One type of clause that may require this strategy is the appositive, which is a phrase in a sentence that provides additional information about the subject, but is not actually necessary to the sentence’s intended meaning.



Ex. **Tulips, a common type of spring flower, begin to bloom after the first thaw.**



Notice that the singular noun 'spring flower' in *the appositive* has no effect on the verb, which agrees with *the plural subject noun* 'tulips'. This rule also applies when the inserted phrase comprises examples of the subject noun.



Ex. **The successful business leader, with examples including managers, supervisors, and executives, is often approachable to subordinates.**



In expletive constructions (sentences beginning with 'there is/was' or 'there are/were'), the word "there" occupies the subject's usual position, and so this construction can create confusion about verb form. However, because "there" is not the subject, the verb agrees with whatever noun follows it.

Ex. **There are many reasons why this observation is true.**



Plural or Singular?

Even though we think of them as plural, the words *each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone, and no one* are singular.

Ex. **Everyone understands this principle.**

Nouns like *news, media, mathematics* and *measles* require singular verbs.

Ex. **The media wants to interview me.**

Collective nouns like *group, team, class* and *family* imply more than one person, but are still singular.

Ex. **This group has to work together.**

Nouns that describe a single object with two or more parts, such as *glasses* and *pants*, often require plural verbs.

Ex. **My glasses are on the table.**