

What Is the Subject-Verb Agreement?

Subject-verb agreement is the grammatical rule that the **verb or verbs in a sentence must match the number, person, and gender of the subject**; in English, the verb needs to match just the number and sometimes the person.

Here is everything you need to tackle any subject-verb agreement exercises you come across, **including demonstrations of how they work with lots of subject-verb agreement examples.**

Subject-verb agreement, also called **“subject-verb concord,”** refers to matching the subject and verb of a sentence in tense, aspect, and mood which translates to number, person, and gender.

English **doesn't use grammatical gender** (except for pronouns), **and only the verb *be* changes based on whether it's first, second, or third person.** That means **most English subject-verb agreement is about quantity**: if the subject is singular, the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.

This can get confusing, though, because talking in the first-person singular (“I **climb** the fence”) uses the same verb format as talking in the first-person plural (“We **climb** the fence”).

Aside from the verb *be*, subject-verb agreement in English adapts verbs to the **third person singular** (“It **climbs** the fence”).

How to conjugate *be* in the singular and plural of each person?

	Singular	Plural
First person	(I) am	(we) are
Second person	(you) are	(you) are
Third person	(he/she/it) is	(they) are

Rules of Subject Verb Agreement

Rule 1. 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 2. 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 3. 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 4. 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.*

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 4** above.

Rule 5. 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.



Rule 6. 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 7. 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 8. 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.

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"*.

Never to use *there's* with a plural subject.

Rule 9. 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 10. 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*

It has been 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 11. 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.*

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 12. 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.

Rule 13. If the subject-verb agreement rules seem complicated, there is some good news: **the simple past and simple future don't change based on the number or person of the subject.** Both singular and plural subjects use the same form for those tenses.

***They will be** here tomorrow.*

***He will be** here tomorrow.*

*The **potatoes grew** overnight!*

*The **potato grew** overnight!*

The only exception is, again, the verb *be*, which changes between *was* and *were* based on the subject in the simple past tense.

*I **was** young once.*

*We **were** young once.*

On the other hand, the **perfect tenses** change their auxiliary verb depending on the number of the subject. Singular subjects use *has*, and plural subjects use *have*.

***They have** not seen the movie yet, so no spoilers.*

***She has** not seen the movie yet, so no spoilers.*

