

Subject-Verb Agreement



Sentences are constructed from subjects and verbs. Subjects are nouns (person, place or thing) representing the spotlight of the sentence, and verbs are words that describe the action, occurrence, or state of the subject. **Subjects and verbs must agree in number**, i.e. a singular subject (she, Maria, firework) needs a singular verb (is, goes, sparkles), while plural subjects (they, we, cars) require plural verbs (are, go, shine).

Notice that the verb always agrees with the subject, not with a noun or pronoun in a phrase between the subject and verb.

- Don't be misled by a phrase that separates the subject and the verb.
Example: The student, as well as her parents, is excited.
- In sentences beginning with "there is" or "there are," the subject follows the verb. Since "there" is not the subject, the verb agrees with what follows.
Examples: There are many animals in this particular zoo.
There is a large gorilla in that exhibit.

In certain situations, it can be difficult to tell if a subject is singular or plural, and we cannot always rely on if a subject has an "s" or not.

- **Collective nouns** are words that imply more than one person but that are considered singular and take a singular verb (group, team, committee, class, family).
Examples: The family goes to the North Shore every year.
The blue group is presenting first.
- Nouns that end in an "s" but refer to one subject (measles, civics, news) are singular and require singular verbs.
Examples: The news is increasingly alarming.
Civics is my favorite class.
- However, nouns that refer to one thing that has more than one part (scissors, tweezers, pants) are usually considered plural and require plural verbs.
Examples: The scissors are in the basket.
The pants need to be ironed.

Most **indefinite pronouns** (each, either, neither, everyone, anybody, nobody, someone, and no one) require a singular verb.

Examples: Everyone is looking forward to graduation.
Somebody needs to pick up more ice from the store.

Compound subjects are created when two or more nouns are joined by a coordinating conjunction (such as and or or). To determine if a compound subject is singular or plural, look at how the parts of the subject are connected. These types of subjects have special rules that we use to determine if the subject is singular or plural.

- If the compound subject is composed of two or more nouns or pronouns connected by "and", then it is considered plural and requires a plural verb.
Example: The boy and his doll are both wearing orange.
- If the compound subject is composed of two or more singular nouns or pronouns connected by "or" or "nor", then it is considered singular and requires a singular verb.
Example: Neither the boy nor his doll is wearing orange.
- If a compound subject contains both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by "or" or "nor", the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is closer to the verb.
Examples: Neither the boy nor his dolls are wearing orange.
Neither the boy's dolls nor the boy is wearing orange.

Material adapted from the *Purdue OWL*.