

Making subjects and verbs agree

Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a word that comes between.

Word groups often come between the subject and the verb in a sentence. Such word groups, usually modifying the subject, may contain a noun that at first appears to be the subject. By mentally stripping away such modifiers, you can isolate the noun that is in fact the subject.


The *samples* on the tray in the lab *need* testing.

- ▶ High levels of air pollution ~~causes~~ damage to the respiratory tract.

The subject is *levels*, not *pollution*. Strip away the phrase *of air pollution* to hear the correct verb: *levels cause*.

NOTE: Phrases beginning with the prepositions *as well as*, *in addition to*, *accompanied by*, *together with*, and *along with* do not make a singular subject plural.

- ▶ The governor as well as his press secretary ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~were~~ shot.

To emphasize that two people were shot, the writer could use *and* instead: *The governor and his press secretary were shot*.

Treat most subjects joined with *and* as plural.

A subject with two or more parts is said to be compound. If the parts are connected by *and*, the subject is nearly always plural.


Leon and Jan often *jog* together.

- ▶ Jill's natural ability and her desire to help others ~~has~~ ^{have} led to a career in the ministry.

Ability and desire is a plural subject, so its verb should be *have*.

EXCEPTIONS: When the parts of the subject form a single unit or when they refer to the same person or thing, treat the subject as singular.

Sue's friend and adviser was surprised by her decision.

When a compound subject is preceded by *each* or *every*, treat it as singular.

Every car, truck, and van is required to pass inspection.

This exception does not apply when a compound subject is followed by *each*: *Alan and Marcia each have different ideas*.

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With subjects joined with *or* or *nor* (or with *either . . . or* or *neither . . . nor*), make the verb agree with the part of the subject nearer to the verb.

▶ If an infant or a child ^{is} ~~are~~ having difficulty breathing, seek medical attention immediately.

▶ Neither the lab assistant nor the students ^{were} ~~was~~ able to download the information.

The verb must be matched with the part of the subject closer to it: *child* is in the first sentence, *students* were in the second.

NOTE: If one part of the subject is singular and the other is plural, put the plural one last to avoid awkwardness.

Treat most indefinite pronouns as singular.

Indefinite pronouns are pronouns that do not refer to specific persons or things. The following commonly used indefinite pronouns are singular.

anybody	each	everyone	nobody	somebody
anyone	either	everything	no one	someone
anything	everybody	neither	nothing	something

Many of these words appear to have plural meanings, and they are often treated as such in casual speech. In formal written English, however, they are nearly always treated as singular.

▶ Each of the furrows ^{has} ~~have~~ been seeded.

▶ Everybody who signed up for the snowboarding trip ^{was} ~~were~~ taking lessons.

The subjects of these sentences are *Each* and *Everybody*. These indefinite pronouns are third-person singular, so the verbs must be *has* and *was*.

A few indefinite pronouns (*all*, *any*, *none*, *some*) may be singular or plural depending on the noun or pronoun they refer to.

Some of our luggage *was* lost. *None* of his advice *makes* sense.

Some of the rocks *are* slippery. *None* of the eggs *were* broken.

NOTE: When the meaning of *none* is emphatically “not one,” *none* may be treated as singular: *None* [meaning “Not one”] *of the eggs was* broken. However, some experts advise using *not one* instead: *Not one of the eggs was* broken.

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Treat collective nouns as singular unless the meaning is clearly plural.

Collective nouns such as *jury*, *committee*, *audience*, *crowd*, *class*, *troop*, *family*, and *couple* name a class or a group. In American English, collective nouns are nearly always treated as singular: They emphasize the group as a unit. Occasionally, when there is some reason to draw attention to the individual members of the group, a collective noun may be treated as plural.

To underscore the notion of individuality in the second sentence, many writers would add a clearly plural noun such as *members*.

- SINGULAR** The *class* respects the teacher.
- PLURAL** The *class are* debating among themselves.

NOTE: The phrase *the number* is treated as singular, *a number* as plural.

- PLURAL** The class *members are* debating among themselves.

NOTE: In general, when units of measurement are used with a singular noun, treat them as singular; when they are used with a plural noun, treat them as plural.

- SINGULAR** *The number* of school-age children is declining.
- PLURAL** *A number* of children are attending the wedding.

Make the verb agree with its subject even when the subject follows the verb.

- SINGULAR** *Three-fourths* of the pie *has* been eaten.
- PLURAL** *One-fourth* of the drivers *were* drunk.

Verbs ordinarily follow subjects. When this normal order is reversed, it is easy to become confused. Sentences beginning with *there is* or *there are* (or *there was* or *there were*) are inverted; the subject follows the verb.

There *are* surprisingly few *children* in our neighborhood.

- There ~~was~~ ^{were} a social worker and a crew of twenty volunteers at the scene of the accident.

The subject, *worker and crew*, is plural, so the verb must be *were*.

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Occasionally you may decide to invert a sentence for variety or effect. When you do so, check to make sure that your subject and verb agree.

- ▶ At the back of the room ^{are} is a small aquarium and an enormous terrarium.

The subject, *aquarium and terrarium*, is plural, so the verb must be *are*. If the correct sentence seems awkward, begin with the subject: *A small aquarium and an enormous terrarium are at the back of the room.*

Make the verb agree with its subject, not with a subject complement.

One basic sentence pattern in English consists of a subject, a linking verb, and a subject complement: *Jack is a securities lawyer*. Because the subject complement names or describes the subject (*Jack*), it is sometimes mistaken for the subject.

These *exercises are* a way to test your ability to perform under pressure.

- ▶ A tent and a sleeping bag ^{are} is the required equipment for all campers.

Tent and bag is the subject, not *equipment*.

- ▶ A major force in today's economy ^{is} are women — as earners, consumers, and investors.

Force is the subject, not *women*. If the corrected version seems awkward, make *women* the subject: *Women are a major force in today's economy — as earners, consumers, and investors.*

Who, which, and that take verbs that agree with their antecedents.

Like most pronouns, the relative pronouns *who*, *which*, and *that* have antecedents, nouns or pronouns to which they refer. Relative pronouns used as subjects of subordinate clauses take verbs that agree with their antecedents.

Take a *suit that travels* well.

Constructions such as *one of the students who* [or *one of the things that*] cause problems for writers. Do not assume that the antecedent must be *one*. Instead, consider the logic of the sentence.

- ▶ Our ability to use language is one of the things that ~~sets~~ us apart from animals.

The antecedent of *that* is *things*, not *one*. Several things set us apart from animals.

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When the word *only* comes before *one*, you are safe in assuming that *one* is the antecedent of the relative pronoun.

- ▶ Veronica was the only one of the first-year Spanish students who ~~were~~^{was} fluent enough to apply for the exchange program.
^
The antecedent of *who* is *one*, not *students*. Only one student was fluent enough.

Words such as *athletics, economics, mathematics, physics, statistics, measles, mumps, and news* are usually singular, despite their plural form.

- ▶ Statistics ~~are~~^{is} among the most difficult courses in our program.
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EXCEPTION: When they describe separate items rather than a collective body of knowledge, words such as *athletics, mathematics, physics, and statistics* are plural: *The statistics on steroid use are alarming.*

Titles of works, company names, words mentioned as words, and gerund phrases are singular.

- ▶ *Lost Cities* ~~describe~~^{describes} the discoveries of many ancient civilizations.
^
- ▶ Delmonico Brothers ~~specialize~~^{specializes} in organic produce and additive-free meats.
^
- ▶ *Controlled substances* ~~are~~^{is} a euphemism for illegal drugs.
^

A gerund phrase consists of an *-ing* verb form followed by any objects, complements, or modifiers. Treat gerund phrases as singular.

- ▶ Encountering busy signals ~~are~~^{is} troublesome to our clients, so we have hired two new switchboard operators.
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