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HIGHER EDUCATION LANGUAGE AND PRESENTATION SUPPORT

# Grammar 1: Subject–verb agreement

## Workshop objectives

This workshop will assist you in becoming familiar with the use of:

- **Countable vs. uncountable nouns**
- **Subject-verb agreement**
- **Singular vs. plural nouns**
- **Indefinite pronouns**

# Countable + Uncountable

- A **countable** noun is one that can be expressed in plural form (e.g. essay/essays).
- An **uncountable** noun is one that usually cannot be expressed in a plural form (e.g. coffee).



# Countable + Uncountable

Some nouns belong to both classes.

**Countable:** concrete and specific meaning

- I've had some *difficulties* finding relevant materials for the essay.
- The *talks* will take place in Building 1.

but

**Uncountable:** abstract and general meaning

- She succeeded at university with little *difficulty*.
- I dislike idle *talk*.

# Countable + Uncountable

## Classification:

Sometimes a usually uncountable noun (often food) can be understood as one item separate and distinct from other kinds of items from the same category.

There are several Australian *wines* to choose from  
I prefer Sumatran *coffees* to Colombian.

Gardner has a theory of multiple *intelligences*.

*ie. varieties of wine, varieties of coffee, types of intelligence*

# Subject-verb agreement

The way the verb is matched to the subject in terms of number (singular or plural).

## There is/are...

In sentences beginning with *There is* or *There are*, the verb agrees with the noun phrase that follows it.

*There are many questions.*

*There is a question.*

*There is much questioning.*

# Collective nouns

Collective nouns take a singular verb if they refer to a group/unit as a whole.

Collective nouns take a plural verb when the noun is referring to individuals in the group.

**The committee** *want* a review of the procedures. **They are** dissatisfied with the current ones.

Other nouns like this include **family, class, team, staff** and **company**.



## Nouns ending in 's'

Some nouns that always end in s are uncountable and take a singular verb.

**The news** *is a source of information.*  
**Physics** *was* my hardest subject.  
**Measles** *is* highly contagious.

Some nouns that always end in s are plural (usually because they come in pairs) and take a plural verb.

**These scissors** *do not align.*  
**The trousers** *are* made of wool.  
**My clothes** *are* made of recycled material.

## Indefinite pronouns

The words *each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone,* and *no-one* are **singular** and require a singular verb.

**Nobody** *has* claimed responsibility.

**Everybody** *has* to pay their taxes.

**but...** Any of the recommended books *are* worth reading.

## Verb+ing as subject

If the subject of a clause is a gerund (verb+ing), a **singular verb** is required.

**Studying** at university *is* a challenge for many.

## And: Compound Subjects

When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more nouns (making them joint operators of the action) connected by *and*, use a **plural verb**.

**John and I** *work* on our assignments together.

**Paraphrasing and summarising** *are* important academic writing skills.

**but...Bacon and eggs** *is* a high protein breakfast. However, **it** is a dish which should be eaten in moderation.



## Or: Singular or plural

When a subject contains two or more nouns joined by or or nor, the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is nearer the verb.

**The book *or* the pen *is*** in the drawer.

**Either the doctor *or* the nurses *attend*** every day.

**Neither the nurses *nor* the doctor *attends*** every day.

# Agreement

The verb agrees with the subject (head noun).

Do not be misled by a phrase that comes between the subject and the verb.

**One** of the boxes *is* open.

**The team captain**, as well as his players, *is* anxious

**The book**, including all the chapters in the first section, *is* boring.

**The woman** with those engineers leads the conference.

## Complex subjects

A noun phrase can contain two or more nouns.  
The verb that follows will agree with the head noun.

**A book of answers** *comes* with the study guide.

# Quantity

An amount, quantity or number thought of as a whole takes a singular verb.

**Six years** *is* a long time.

**Three dollars** *is* not much.

**The number** of students on the course *is* less than last year.

A plural verb highlights the individuals in the group.

A number of **students** *do* not understand the assignment question.



# Proportions

With fractions, percentages and indefinite quantifiers (*all, few, many, much, some, half, none* etc.), the verb agrees with the preceding noun.

Two-thirds of the **task** *is* completed.

Two-thirds of his **articles** *are* peer-reviewed.

Fifty percent of **what he writes** *is* undocumented.

Fifty percent of the **computers** *are* iMacs.

All the **information** *is* correct.

All the **studies** *are* current.

Much of the **book** *seems* relevant to this assignment.

Many **researchers** *depend* on grants from industry.

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