

# JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

### Principle

Every verb should agree in number with its subject. In other words, a singular subject requires a singular verb; a plural subject requires a plural verb.

### Reasons for Faulty Agreement

Sometimes lack of agreement is the result of carelessness.

Sometimes the writer can identify the subject and verb with no problem. But then the writer applies incorrect usage because he/she is unfamiliar with the various verb forms or has simply formed a habit of using verb forms incorrectly.

Incorrect: We **was** going to the movies.      Correct: We **were** going to the movies.

	Singular Subject	Singular Verb	Plural Subject	Plural Verb
1 <sup>st</sup> person	I	was	We	were
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	You	were	(All of) You	were
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	He/She/It	was	They	were

Incorrect: It **look** like a storm is coming up.      Correct: It **looks** like a storm is coming up.

	Singular Subject	Singular Verb	Singular Subject	Singular Verb
1 <sup>st</sup> person	I	look	We	look
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	You	look	(All of) You	look
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	He/She/It	looks	They	look

Perhaps the writer is not familiar with correctly writing plural and singular subjects. If a singular subject is used when the writer uses a plural verb, the problem might be that the writer wrote the incorrect form of the noun.

Incorrect: All the fly around here **are** driving me crazy.

Correct: All of the flies around here **are** driving me crazy.

Incorrect: Fall is a beautiful time of the year; this is when the leaf **change** color.

Correct: Fall is a beautiful time of the year; this is when the leaves **change** color.  
Incorrect: Documented over and over again and proven in hundreds of study is the fact that mother's chicken soup is an effective medicine.

Correct: Documented over and over again and proven in hundreds of studies is the fact that mother's chicken soup is an effective medicine.

If you are familiar with singular and plural verbs and nouns, but from time to time still make subject-verb agreement errors, the reason may be the one that frequently plagues writers: difficulty identifying the subject because words intervene between the subject and the verb.

Which noun is the subject in the following sentence?

noun                      noun      verb  
Each year, the size of the bears amaze me.

Subject = size              Verb = amazes

(The bears do not amaze me; their size **amazes** me.)

Which noun is the subject in the following sentence?

noun                      noun      verb  
The services of a doctor was needed.

Subject = services      Verb = were needed

(The doctor was not needed; her services **were needed**.)

To avoid making subject-verb agreement errors in your writing, here are some

### RULES TO REMEMBER

1. Don't be confused by words or phrases that intervene between the subject and verb. Find the subject and make the verb agree with it.

The coach, as well as the players, **was/were** happy over the victory.

subject = coach                      verb = **was**

A man such as Alex, John, or Harry **is/are** not going to be very happy with such a low salary.

subject = man                      verb = **is**

2. Compound and plural subjects take plural verbs whether or not the subject is inverted (e.g., the verb precedes the subject).

Music, theater, and art **is/are** grouped as the fine arts.

A dog and cat **is/are** seldom friends.

Carefully noting my two bald tires **was/were** a policeman.

Lumbering off the ark's gangplank **was/were** the elephants.

3. Use a singular verb when the two parts of a compound subject refer to the same person or thing.

one and the same person                      sing.

My roommate and best friend **is/are** Jim.

one person    sing.

Snow White's mother and worst enemy **wait/waits** nearby with a poisoned apple.

4. Use a singular verb when a plural subject represents a unit idea.

sing.                      sing.

Cornflakes **is/are** my favorite cereal.

sing.                      sing.

Ten dollars **is/are** too much for that scarf.

Graham, Marks, and Wood **is/are** a law firm specializing in international law.

5. Use the appropriate verb when subjects are joined by or or nor.

- a. Singular subjects joined by or or nor take singular verbs.

sing.                      sing.                      sing.

A child or teenager **is/are** eligible to win the prize.

sing.                      sing.                      sing.

Neither Thomas nor Evelyn **wants/want** to give a speech.

b. Plural subjects joined by or or nor take plural verbs.

plural plural pl.

Players or their spouses ~~was~~/**were** permitted to sit in the audience.

plural plural plural

The decision as to whether his sisters or brothers ~~rakes~~/**rake** the yard was left up to him.

c. If one subject is singular and the other plural and they are joined by or or nor, the verb agrees with the nearest subject.

sing. plural pl.

Mary or her sisters ~~has~~/**have** to do it.

plural sing. singular

It was either his poor bindings or his bad form that ~~was~~/**were** responsible for his fall.

singular plural plural

If California or the other western states ~~agrees~~/**agree** with his stand on the proposed conservation measures, then more land will become part of the national parks system.

6. A verb of being (to be) agrees with its subject, not the complement following it, unless the subject is a what clause followed by a plural subject.

sing. sing.

His mania ~~was~~/**were** cameras.

sing. subject

sing.

Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Japan ~~is~~/**are** the topic for discussion at the next council meeting.

what clause pl. pl.

What concerns me most ~~is~~/**are** the conditions they have to endure.

sing. sing.

The best part of the meal ~~is~~/**are** the coffee and cookies.

plural plural

Coffee and cookies ~~is~~/**are** the best part of the meal.

7. A verb of being (to be) introduced by there agrees with the subject following it.

pl. plural

There was/**were** one hundred guests at the party.

sing. sing.

There **is/are** no reason to be upset.

8. Singular indefinite pronouns require singular verbs. These indefinite pronouns are singular:

either	each	anybody	nobody
neither	everyone	someone	one
many a one	everybody	somebody	another
such a	anyone	no one	anything
every			

sing. sing.

Each student **has/have** his or her own money.

sing. sing

Each of the students **has/have** his or her own money.

sing. sing.

Everyone **leaves/leave** together.

sing. sing.

Someone **is/are** speaking now.

sing. sing.

One of you **has/have** made a mistake.

plural sing. sing.

9. Some nouns or pronouns are considered singular or plural according to the singular or plural number of the key word in a modifying phrase.

Examples: some, all, half, none (no one or not any), more, most.

sing. sing.

Some of my money **has/have** been stolen.

plural plural

Some of our students **has/have** been awarded scholarships.

sing. sing.

There is no food left; all of it **has/have** been eaten.

plural pl. pl.

No students are left in the building; each of them **has/have** taken cover from the storm.

(Although Astudents≡ is plural, the subsequent use of Aeach≡ requires a singular verb.)

plural plural plural plural  
No students are left in the building; all of them has/**have** taken cover from the storm.

sing. sing.  
Half of this cake **has**/have been eaten.

plural plural  
Half of these cookies has/**have** been eaten.

10. Relative pronouns referring to plural antecedents require plural verbs; relative pronouns referring to singular antecedents require singular verbs.

plural pron. pl.  
Each club has its own officers **who** conduct the club's business.

sing. pron. sing.  
Our city has an excellent park **which** attracts many picnickers.

11. A collective noun takes a singular verb when the group is regarded as a unit, a plural verb when the individuals of the group are regarded separately.

Some common collective nouns:

army	flock	orchestra
clergy	group	pair
committee	herd	squad
company	jury	team
couple	mob	public
crowd	class	
family	multitude	

Ex. The class **is**/are ready for the test. (sing. unit)

The class has/**have** their books open and is/**are** studying. (individuals)

Remember the following points about collective nouns.

1. Measurements are singular as a unit but plural as individual objects.

unit-sing. sing.  
Ex. Five miles is a long walk.

unit-sing. sing.  
Six months is a long time to wait.

indiv-pl. pl.  
Six months have passed since we last saw her.

2. Numbers are singular when expressing division or subtraction.

Ex. Four divided by three **is** twelve.

Numbers can be singular or plural when expressing multiplication or addition.

Ex. Two times two is/are four (**can be either**)

3. Words ending in ics may be singular or plural depending on how they are used.

sing.

Ex. Physics **is/are** a hard course. (sing. unit)

plural

Athletics **is/are** expensive. (num. sports)

4. Data and other Latin words ending in a are plural and in formal writing should use a plural verb; however, in informal writing they often use singular verbs.

formal/informal

Ex. The data are/is reliable. (**can be either**)

<p><i>Tropical Fruits</i> is/are a new fruit punch on the market.  Ten dollars is/are too much to spend on a scarf.  The news about spiral galaxies seem/seems unbelievable.  Mumps make/makes one's cheeks hurt and cause/causes swelling and fever.  Five years is/are certainly a long time to wait.</p>	<p>When the Subject Looks Plural But is Singular in Meaning</p> <p>There are many subjects that look plural (in other words, that end in -s) but are singular in meaning. These include the names of school subjects--mathematics, linguistics, physics, economics, civics--and the names of some diseases--measles, mumps, AIDS, and herpes. They also include miscellaneous words like politics and news.</p>
<p>On top of the building was/were TV antennas.  Carefully noting my two bald tires was/were a policeman.  Located five miles away was/were a prison and a hospital.  A prison and a hospital was/were located five miles away.  If several winter sports or just skiing is/are of interest to you, then the Rocky Mountains is/are the place to be this winter.  John or his friends is/are responsible for breaking the window.</p>	<p>Compound and plural subjects take plural verbs whether or not the subject is inverted (e.g., the verb precedes the subject).</p> <p>When two or more subjects in a sentence are joined by or nor, the verb form is usually determined by the subject that is closest to the verb.</p>
<p>Neither of the local libraries has/have the book I need.  Neither the producer, the director, nor the author was/were able to prevent Brando from walking off the set.  Neither the leader nor the members of the Black Knights has/have been seen in the park.  Either the dean or his assistant was/were to have handled the matter.  Some nouns or pronouns are considered singular or plural according to the singular or plural number of the key word in a modifying phrase.</p>	<p>Singular indefinite pronouns require singular verbs.</p>
<p>The burden of sales taxes falls/fall on the poor.  The color of the stage setting seems drab.  The colors of the stage setting seem drab.  Companies such as General Motors has/have many thousands of employees.  The repetition of notes in many jazz pieces is/are a major reason for their success.  The cost of books has/have been rising.  The operation of two farms keeps/keep my father busy.  A woman who has a career and a family has very little time for herself.</p>	<p>Words that come between a subject and its verb do <u>not</u> affect the number (singular or plural) of the subject.</p>



<p>Each man and woman was/were questioned by the reporter. Everyone is/are planning to attend the concert.</p>	<p>He is the only one of all the councilmen who is/are opposed to the project. When used as a subject, the following pronouns are always considered singular and need verbs with -s endings on them in the present tense: each, either, neither, every, everybody, everyone, everything, anybody, anyone, anything, somebody, someone, something, nobody, no one, nothing.</p>
<p>Either of the parents is going to explode soon. Neither parent is in control. Each of the family members has to control his or her aggression.</p>	<p>When a singular pronoun, such as either, neither, each, or every is separated from its verb by other words, it is easy to get confused about the form of the verb. Remember that words that come between a subject and its verb do <u>not</u> affect the number of the subject or the form of the verb.</p>
<p>The team of scientists monitors the Milky Way. The team of scientists disagree about those stars. This group of stars is known as the Andromeda Galaxy. That group of stars have separated to form new galaxies.  There is one collective noun that does function like the others listed above: the word number. When it is used in the phrase in the number of, it is always a singular subject, and when it is used in the phrase a number of, it is always a plural subject. A number of galaxies are shaped like disks. The number of disk-shaped galaxies is growing.</p>	<p>A collective noun is the name of a group that usually functions like a single unit. Some examples include family, class, audience, crowd, committee, team, jury, orchestra and group. If you are referring to the group as a single unit, then the noun is a singular subject (and needs an -s ending on its verb). If you are referring to the individual members of the group, then the noun is a plural subject.</p>
	<p>The pronouns <b>some</b>, <b>none</b>, <b>any</b>, and <b>most</b> can be either singular or plural subjects depending upon the words that follow them. For example, <b>some</b> can mean "more than one," in which case the subject is plural, or it can mean "a part of one," in</p>

	<p>which case the subject is singular.</p> <p><u>Some</u> of the families studied <u>commit</u> emotional abuse.</p> <p><u>Some</u> of the problem <u>is</u> caused by television.</p> <p><u>Most</u> of the family members <u>remain</u> silent about it.</p> <p><u>Most</u> of the information <u>comes</u> from their neighbors.</p>
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What frequently annoys me is/are the tapping of pencils while I'm trying to read.

Books is/are a necessity in her life.

A necessity in her life is/are books.

Each muscle of the frog's body and each organ was/were carefully examined by the student

The crowd of people has/have saluted the flag in the past.

Half of the buildings is/are dilapidated and should be torn down.

Half of the building is/are dilapidated and should be torn down.