

Subject verb agreement

Basic Rule. 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

Rule 1. 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,

Incorrect: A bouquet of yellow roses lend colour and fragrance to the room.

Correct: A bouquet of yellow roses lends . . . (bouquet lends, not roses lend)

Rule 2. 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 3. 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.

Rule 4. 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 5a. 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

Examples:

The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly. Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.

Rule 5b. 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 6. 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.

Rule 7. 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 8. 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. 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.

Rule 9. 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 favour OR were not in favour of the bill.

NOTE

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 10. The words were replacing 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 things that are hypothetical,

wishful, imaginary, or factually contradictory. 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.

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