

# Subject-Verb Agreement

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A fundamental principle of English grammar is agreement. Pronouns match (*agree*) with the nouns they refer to, and verbs match (*agree*) with their subjects. If the subject is singular, so is the verb. If the subject is plural, so is the verb.

A light flashes.	[singular subject and verb]
Lights flash.	[plural subject and verb]

Normally the **-s** or **-es** ending marks a noun or verb as singular or plural. Singular nouns become plural when **-s** or **-es** is added (**house** is singular, **houses** plural).

The opposite is true of verbs in the present tense: singular verbs have the **-s** or **-es** ending, while plural verbs do not (**makes** is singular, and **make** plural). So when you are writing in the present tense, remember the following general rule:

EITHER THE SUBJECT OR THE VERB (BUT NOT BOTH)  
TAKES THE **-s** OR **-es** ENDING.

Some exceptions follow. A consistent general principle runs through them: when the meaning is singular, the verb is singular, and when the meaning is plural, the verb is plural.

1. Irregular plural nouns like **children, people, men, women, data, media**, are followed by plural verbs: **People think**.
2. Some nouns look plural because they end in “s” but are singular because they refer to a single thing or idea: **mathematics, politics**. Such nouns take singular verbs because their meaning is singular: **Mathematics challenges the brain**.
3. Conversely, some nouns look singular because they do not end in “s” but are often plural in meaning: **family, team**. With these collective nouns, let the meaning be the guide. Use a singular verb when the group is acting as a unit (**The team wins**) but a plural when the members of the group are acting individually (**The team are tested for drugs**).
4. Two or more singular nouns linked by “and” take a plural verb: **The cat and the heron stalk the unwary frog**. Here the idea is plural: both the cat and the heron are stalking. Such sentences have multiple subjects, equivalent to a plural.
5. Two or more nouns linked by **either, or, neither, or nor** present a trickier grammatical problem. If we write **Either Henry or George wins the race**, only one will win so the verb is logically singular. A difficulty arises only in the rare cases when one of these nouns is singular

and the other plural. Since our ears are accustomed to nouns and verbs that agree, the problem is solved by matching the verb with the nearer noun: **Either the Skytrain or the busses are running**, or **Either the busses or the Skytrain is running**.

6. Indefinite pronouns ending in **–one, –body, or –thing** are singular: **Somebody knows, but nobody cares**. Other indefinite pronouns (**all, some, most**) can be singular or plural, depending on the meaning: **All of the trees have been felled**, or **All the forest has been felled**.
7. In sentences that begin with expressions like **There is** or **There are**, the true subject follows the verb: **There is dancing in the aisles. There are fireworks on the stage**. The same is true of questions beginning with **What** or **Where**: **Where is the manager? Where are the police?**
8. Within relative clauses beginning with **who, which, or that**, the verb agrees with the noun to which these pronouns refer: **Jenkins is a performer who is always underrated. People who have seen her say she’s brilliant**.
9. The first-person pronoun **I** and the second-person **you** are always followed by verbs without the **–s** ending: **I walk, you run**. So the singular-plural rule does not apply to them.

In many sentences, the principle of subject-verb agreement is easy to apply. The verb either immediately follows the subject (**Class has begun**) or immediately precedes it, as in questions (**Has class begun yet?**). Problems are more likely to arise when other expressions intervene between subject and verb: **The apples in the refrigerator are still fresh**. Here the apples, not the refrigerator, are fresh, and therefore the verb is plural. Two rules are helpful when you are checking the agreement of subject and verb:

1. **The subject of a sentence never follows a preposition.**

Examples:     Students in the parade carry banners.  
                  One of the most serious issues is air pollution.  
                  People in government are listening.

The subjects of these sentences are **Students, One, and People** respectively. The information in the underlined prepositional phrases simply makes them more specific.

2. **The subject of a sentence is never enclosed by commas.**

Examples:     Three students, including Doreen, are running for office.  
                  Dancing and baseball, along with skiing, are my favorite hobbies.  
                  Jack, one of my best friends, has a job in Kamloops.  
                  The flour, as well as the sugar, has run out.

The subjects here are **Three students, Dancing and baseball, Jack, and The flour**. The verbs are singular or plural accordingly. If the lack of sugar were as significant as the lack of flour, the last sentence would read **The flour and the sugar have run out**. Anything enclosed within commas is incidental information: it may add to the meaning of the sentence, but it is not essential.

Subjects and verbs are essential to all complete sentences. Choose them carefully, and be sure they agree.