

## Subject-Verb Guidelines

Every sentence must have a **subject** and a verb. Subjects and verbs also must have matching forms, called agreement. Every verb must agree with its subject in **number**: singular or plural.

### Examples

#### Singular

**She** does an excellent job.  
**Julio** has a new car.  
Was **Karen** at home?  
The **car** is in the garage.

#### Plural

**They** do an excellent job.  
**Julio** and **Maria** have a new car.  
Were **Karen** and **Jill** at home?  
There are **cars** in the garage.

**Note:** Some words may sound like plural words but are actually singular. The following words, called indefinite pronouns, always take singular verbs.

#### (-one words)

one  
anyone  
everyone  
someone

#### (-body words)

nobody  
anybody  
everybody  
somebody

#### (-thing words)

nothing  
anything  
everything  
something

#### (other examples)

each  
either  
neither

### Examples

**Wrong:** Everyone in the bands know that tune.  
**Correct:** **Everyone** ~~in the bands~~ **knows** that tune.

**Wrong:** Neither of the boys work in Okeechobee.  
**Correct:** **Neither** ~~of the boys~~ **works** in Okeechobee.

**Wrong:** Everything in the world's oceans serve a purpose.  
**Correct:** **Everything** ~~in the world's oceans~~ **serves** a purpose.

- Some words are always plural. The following words are plural.

several      few      both      many      all

**Hint:** In many cases, if the subject ends in "s" the verb does not.

The **girl** sings in the choir. (singular - one girl)  
The **girls** sing in the choir. (plural - more than one girl)

## Basic rules for subject-verb agreement

Note: In the examples, subjects are in **bold**, and verbs are underlined.

1. **Compound subjects:** When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more nouns or pronouns connected by the word “and,” use a plural verb.

**Bob** *and* his **friends** are going to the game.

2. **When nouns or pronouns are joined by the words “or” / “nor,”** the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is closer to the verb.

The **girl** *or* her **friends** run every day.

Her **friends** *or* the **girl** runs every day.

3. **When a phrase comes between the subject and the verb,** the verb agrees with the subject, not with a noun or pronoun in the phrase.

**One** of the copiers is broken.

The **coach**, as well as his players, is confident.

4. **Some singular nouns ending in “s”** (news, economics, physics, statistics, mathematics, measles, dollars), are not plural. Use a singular verb.

The national **news** is on Channel 12 every evening.

Five **miles** is too far to walk.

**Note:** the word “dollars” is a special case. When talking about an amount of money, it requires a singular verb, but when referring to the dollars themselves, a plural verb is required.

**Eight dollars** is a lot of money.

**Dollars** are often used instead of pesos in Mexico.

5. **Nouns such as scissors, tweezers, trousers, and shears require plural verbs. (There are two parts to these things.)**

These **scissors** are dull.                      Those **socks** are made of wool.

6. **In sentences beginning with "there" or "here" or questions beginning with "where" or "why," the subject follows the verb.**

There are many **questions**.                      Where is your **dog**?  
Here are your **tools**.                      Why are **they** leaving today?

7. **Collective nouns - such as group, team, committee, class, and family - can be either singular or plural, depending on context.**

**\*If the individuals are functioning as a unit, the noun is singular.**  
The **jury** delivered its decision.

**\*If the members are functioning as individuals, the noun is plural.**  
The **jury** does not always agree when trying to reach a decision.

8. **Expressions separating the subject and verb do not change the number of the subject. If the subject is singular, the verb is too.**

The **teacher**, accompanied by his wife, is traveling to Mexico.  
**All** of the tools, including yours, are in that box.

9. **When subject words indicate portions — e.g., *a lot, a majority, some, all*— the sentence should be guided by the noun after "of."**

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.

10. **Subjects ending in "ing" are considered singular.**

**Washing** windows is hard work. ("Washing" is the subject).  
**Racing** motorcycles was one of my hobbies. ("Racing" is the subject).

## Special Issues in Agreement

**Error:** The **Veterans of Foreign Wars** are marching in the parade.  
**Problem:** Clubs, organizations, and businesses are regarded as a single unit.  
**Correction:** The **Veterans of Foreign Wars** is marching in the parade.

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**Error:** **Dan Marino** is one of many quarterbacks **who** does not have a Super Bowl ring.

**Problem:** Dan Marino is just one of *many* quarterbacks who have not won Super Bowls.

**Correction:** **Dan Marino** is one of many quarterbacks **who** do not have a Super Bowl ring.

**Remember:** Be aware of the word “*only*,” which changes the meaning of the sentence.

**Dan Marino** is the *only* one of those quarterbacks **who** does not have a Super Bowl ring.

**Explanation:** The pronoun “who” refers to a *specific* singular noun (Dan Marino).

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**Error:** I'd be safe and warm if **I** was in L.A.

**Problem:** The subjunctive mood (expressing an idea contrary to fact) pairs singular subjects with what are usually plural verbs.

**Correction:** I'd be safe and warm if **I** were in L.A.

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**Error:** Mary's favorite **dessert** are cranberry muffins.

**Problem:** A linking verb (“is,” “are,” “was,” “were,” “seem” and others) agrees with its subject, not its complement.

**Correction:** Mary's favorite **dessert** is cranberry muffins.

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**Error:** “**Cats**” are one of my favorite plays.

**Problem:** Use a singular verb for the title of a work: books, movies, etc.

**Correction:** “**Cats**” is one of my favorite plays.

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