

Subject and Verb Agreement

Basic Rule. The basic rule states that a singular subject takes a singular verb, while a plural subject takes a plural verb. NOTE: The trick is in knowing whether the subject is singular or plural. The next trick is recognizing a singular or plural verb.

Hint: Verbs do not form their plurals by adding an s as nouns do. In order to determine which verb is singular and which one is plural, think of which verb you would use with *he* or *she* and which verb you would use with *they*.

Example: *talks, talk*
Which one is the singular form? Which word would you use with *he*? We say, "He talks."
Therefore, *talks* is singular. We say, "They talk." Therefore, *talk* is plural.

Rule 1. Two singular subjects connected by *or* or *nor* require a singular verb.

Example: *My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today.*

Rule 2. Two singular subjects connected by *either/or* or *neither/nor* require a singular verb as in Rule 1.

Examples: *Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.*

Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.

Rule 3. When *I* is one of the two subjects connected by *either/or* or *neither/nor*, put it second and follow it with the singular verb *am*.

Example: *Neither she nor I am going to the festival.*

Rule 4. When a singular subject is connected by *or* or *nor* to a plural subject, put the plural subject last and use a plural verb.

Example: *The serving bowl or the plates go on that shelf.*

Rule 5. When a singular and plural subject are connected by *either/or* or *neither/nor*, put the plural subject last and use a plural verb.

Example: *Neither Jenny nor the others are available.*

Rule 6. 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.*

Rule Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by words such as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, or *not*.

7. Ignore these expressions when determining whether to use a singular or plural verb.

Examples: *The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.*

Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.

Rule 8. The pronouns *each*, *everyone*, *every one*, *everybody*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *someone*, and *somebody* are singular and require singular verbs. Do not be misled by what follows *of*.

Examples: *Each of the girls sings well.*

Every one of the cakes is gone.

NOTE: *Everyone* is one word when it means *everybody*. *Every one* is two words when the meaning is *each one*.

Rule 9. With words that indicate portions—*percent*, *fraction*, *part*, *majority*, *some*, *all*, *none*, *remainder*, and so forth—look at the noun in your *of* phrase (object of the preposition) to determine whether to use a singular or plural verb. If the object of the preposition is singular, use a singular verb. If the object of the preposition is plural, use a plural verb.

Examples: *Fifty percent of the pie has disappeared.*
Pie is the object of the preposition *of*.

Fifty percent of the pies have disappeared.
Pies is the object of the preposition.

One-third of the city is unemployed.

One-third of the people are unemployed.
NOTE: Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions.

All of the pie is gone.

All of the pies are gone.

Some of the pie is missing.

Some of the pies are missing.

None of the garbage was picked up.

None of the sentences were punctuated correctly.

Of all her books, none have sold as well as the first one.

NOTE: Apparently, the SAT testing service considers *none* as a singular word only. However, according to *Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, "Clearly *none* has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. The notion that it is singular only is a myth of unknown origin that appears to have arisen in the 19th century. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. Both are acceptable beyond serious criticism" (p. 664).

Rule 10. When *either* and *neither* are subjects, they always take singular verbs.

Examples: *Neither of them is available to speak right now.*

Either of us is capable of doing the job.

Rule 11. The words *here* and *there* have generally been labeled as adverbs even though they indicate place. In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the subject follows the verb.

Examples: *There are four hurdles to jump.*

There is a high hurdle to jump.

Rule 12. Use a singular verb with sums of money or periods of time.

Examples: *Ten dollars is a high price to pay.*

Five years is the maximum sentence for that offense.

Rule 13. Sometimes the pronoun *who*, *that*, or *which* is the subject of a verb in the middle of the sentence. The pronouns *who*, *that*, and *which* become singular or plural according to the noun directly in front of them. So, if that noun is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

Examples: *Salma is the scientist who writes/write the reports.*

The word in front of *who* is *scientist*, which is singular. Therefore, use the singular verb *writes*.

He is one of the men who does/do the work.

The word in front of *who* is *men*, which is plural. Therefore, use the plural verb *do*.

Rule 14. Collective nouns such as *team* and *staff* may be either singular or plural depending on their use in the sentence.

Examples: *The staff is in a meeting.*
Staff is acting as a unit here.

The staff are in disagreement about the findings.
The staff are acting as separate individuals in this example.

The sentence would read even better as:
The staff members are in disagreement about the findings.