COMMON PROBLEMS

1. *e–s is often forgotten in the 3rd person singular of the present tense*

   **INCORRECT**
   - The student **attend** the language course and he study hard.

   **CORRECT**
   - The student **attends** the language course and **studies** hard.

2. *Frequently has and have are used incorrectly.*

   **INCORRECT**
   - The course **have** taught me a lot.
   - She/He/Mary/The Governor **have** friends.

   **CORRECT**
   - The course **has** taught me a lot.
   - She / He / Mary / The Governor **has** friends.

3. *Mistakes are also made with is/are and was/were.*

   **INCORRECT**
   - Jose and Eduardo **is** from Mexico.
   - Some students **was** late this morning.
   - We/You/They/The footballers/The women **is** here.

   **CORRECT**
   - Jose and Eduardo **are** from Mexico.
   - Some students **were** late this morning.
   - We/You/They/The footballers/The women **are** here.

4. *Another common mistake is with do and does, especially in negative sentences*

   **INCORRECT**
   - He **don't** study Chemistry; he study Physics.

   **CORRECT**
   - He **does not** study Chemistry; he **studies** Physics.

*Note:* You must be careful to look at the subject of the verb, decide if it is singular or plural, and then choose the appropriate verb form:

- **Verb stem + s:** studies, plays, runs if the noun is **singular**.
- **Verb stem alone:** study, play, run if the noun is **plural**.

5. *Often a mistake is made by using a plural verb because of the influence of a plural noun. Here the subject is the number of students on the course, but the key word is number. Therefore, the verb must be singular – **is**.*

   **INCORRECT**
   - The number of students on the course **are** less than last year.

   **CORRECT**
   - The number of students on the course **is** less than last year

6. *Some nouns which are grammatically singular may be followed by a plural verb form. These are often called collective nouns. Collective nouns take a singular verb when the noun is referring to a unit; they take a plural verb when the noun is referring to individuals within the group*

   - The government **has** made an important decision.
   - The government **have** made an important decision.
   - The English football team **was** beaten by Italy.
   - The English football team **were** beaten by Italy.
   - The class **has** a test on Friday.
   - The class **have** a test on Friday.

7. *Sometimes the noun may be separated from the verb by another clause.*

   - The child, although recovering from a series of long illnesses, **was** ready to enter the race.
8. Nouns that are plural in form but singular in meaning (eg measles) usually require a singular verb. In the same way, an amount, quantity or number thought of as a whole (eg six weeks) takes a singular verb. However, nouns that are plural in form and plural in meaning (eg scissors) usually require a plural verb.

- Physics deals with light, sound, heat, electricity and matter in motion.
- Mumps is a dangerous illness for adults.
- Mathematics is an essential subject in high school.
- Thirteen dollars is not much.
- Six years is a long time.
- Spectacles are expensive today.
- Riches are illusory.
- His pants/trousers were blue.

9. Learn these examples by heart:
   a) Almost always singular (ie verb in singular form): news, information, music, mathematics, phonetics, the United States, advice, evidence, accommodation
   - The news was very good.
   b) Usually singular: aid (meaning ‘assistance’), research
   - His research is progressing very well.
   c) Always plural (ie verb in plural form): people, police, cattle
   - The police are doing their best to control the traffic.
   d) Singular and plural (ie these words do not change; but the verb may be singular or plural according to the meaning.
   - The series of experiments that he conducted was very successful.

**EXERCISE 1**

Now look at the following examples (subject and verb are in **bold**). Match them with an explanation from sections 1-9 above:

a) The *child* is ready.
   - The child is ready.

b) Her *parents* are waiting.
   - Her parents are waiting.

c) The *case* of oranges is bad.
   - The case of oranges is bad.

d) The *trucks* of sand are arriving.
   - The trucks of sand are arriving.

e) Twenty-five *years* of marriage is a long time.
   - Twenty-five years of marriage is a long time.

f) *Three kilometres* is not far.
   - Three kilometres is not far.

g) *Jack*, not *Jill*, is to blame.
   - Jack, not Jill, is to blame.

h) The *crowd* is a record.
   - The crowd is a record.

i) The *crowd* are fighting amongst themselves.
   - The crowd are fighting amongst themselves.

j) *Spectacles* are usually cheaper than contact lenses.
   - Spectacles are usually cheaper than contact lenses.

k) *Measles* is a disease which can cause blindness and death.
   - Measles is a disease which can cause blindness and death.

l) The *news* was not good.
   - The news was not good.

m) There *are* lots of *rooms* in the house.
   - There are lots of rooms in the house.

n) There *is* lots of room on the bus.
   - There is lots of room on the bus.

o) The *amount* of supporters *was* overwhelming.
   - The amount of supporters was overwhelming.

**EXERCISE 2**

Choose the verb that correctly completes the sentence:

a) Meat with potatoes *(is/are)* my brother’s favourite meal.
   - Meats with potatoes *(is/are)* my brother’s favourite meal.

b) The box of texts *(is/are)* filled with various colours.
   - The box of texts *(is/are)* filled with various colours.

c) The list of items *(include/includes)* everything you will need for the trip.
   - The list of items (includes) everything you will need for the trip.

d) My brother, who has three children, *(is/are)* visiting us this Christmas.
   - My brother, who has three children, *(is/are)* visiting us this Christmas.

e) The cost of repairs for the car *(was/were)* very high.
   - The cost of repairs for the car *(was/were)* very high.

f) The nature of the problems *(is/are)* not known.
   - The nature of the problems *(is/are)* not known.

g) The percentage of absences in schools *(have/has)* been increasing.
   - The percentage of absences in schools *(have/has)* been increasing.

h) The captain and his men *(was/were)* able to fight off the invaders.
   - The captain and his men *(was/were)* able to fight off the invaders.

i) Mathematics *(is/are)* a difficult subject for me.
   - Mathematics *(is/are)* a difficult subject for me.

j) Ninety dollars for a pair of shoes *(is/are)* ridiculous.
   - Ninety dollars for a pair of shoes *(is/are)* ridiculous.

k) Mumps *(cause/causes)* the salivary glands to swell.
   - Mumps *(cause/causes)* the salivary glands to swell.

l) *Measles* *(is/are)* contagious.
   - Measles *(is/are)* contagious.

m) *Riches* *(is/are)* not easy to obtain.
   - Riches *(is/are)* not easy to obtain.

n) Fifty years *(is/are)* a short time in history.
   - Fifty years *(is/are)* a short time in history.

o) Here *(is/are)* a list of classes we can attend.
   - Here *(is/are)* a list of classes we can attend.

p) Here *(is/are)* some ways of organising ourselves.
   - Here *(is/are)* some ways of organising ourselves.

q) There *(is/are)* too many students in my group.
   - There *(is/are)* too many students in my group.
CONFUSING CASES

There are many words that are not always obviously singular or plural. Most of us have picked up which verbs to use in the following cases, but the incorrect forms are used in many parts of the community, so it is easy to become confused.

1. The following words take a singular verb: each, everybody, someone, either, neither, everyone, nobody
   - Each is expected to know.
2. In addition, a singular subject remains singular when other nouns are connected to it by: with, together with, except, as well as
   - The man with the little girl is over there.
3. However, a compound subject made up of two or more nouns joined by and requires a plural verb.
   - The man and the woman are sitting quietly.
4. Book titles take a singular verb.
   - The Far Pavilions is a book about India.
   - Great Expectations was written by Charles Dickens.
5. None and all can take a singular or a plural verb, depending on what they mean. Use a singular verb when none means no one, not one or not any, but a plural verb when none suggests more than one person. Similarly, all takes a singular verb when meaning the whole, but a plural verb when meaning all the particulars.
   - None of us is perfect.
   - All is well.
   - None are so good that they can claim perfection.
   - All are at the station
6. Mathematical computations may take either a singular or plural verb. You must be consistent, though, in any piece of work.
   - Six and six is twelve.
   - Six and six are twelve.
7. When two subjects are joined by ‘or’ or ‘nor’, the verb is singular or plural depending on which subject is nearer to it.
   - Either the tutor or the students in his class are in the right.
   - Neither John nor Jeremy is willing to sacrifice his job
8. A sentence beginning with ‘There’ poses problems. ‘There’ is not the subject.
   - There are six runners in the race.
   - There is a Davis Cup match on television.
9. When the subject is a relative pronoun (who, which, that), the verb agrees with the antecedent (the noun which the relative pronoun refers to) of that pronoun.
   - Barry is one of the men who act as public relations officers for the cyclist.
   - This is one of those games that have a bearing on the eventual championship winner.
10. A fraction takes a singular verb if it is followed by a singular noun but a plural verb if it is followed by a plural noun.
    - Two-thirds of the task is completed.
    - Half of the pieces were missing.
**EXERCISE 3**
Correct the following:

a) Everyone think they are considerate.  
   **Correct:** Everyone thinks they are considerate.

b) None of us are blameless.  
   **Correct:** None of us is blameless.

c) The van with its canopy have been lost in the flood.  
   **Correct:** The van with its canopy has been lost in the flood.

d) Each are ready to go.  
   **Correct:** Each is ready to go.

e) The Queen and the bodyguard is arriving at the hotel.  
   **Correct:** The Queen and the bodyguard are arriving at the hotel.

f) All the preparations is done.  
   **Correct:** All the preparations are done.

g) Everybody who ever met him want to go to the dinner.  
   **Correct:** Everybody who ever met him wants to go to the dinner.

**EXERCISE 4**
Choose the verb that correctly completes the sentence:

a) Writing with footnotes (is/are) informative.  
   **Correct:** Writing with footnotes is informative.

b) The shelf of books (was/were) poorly stacked.  
   **Correct:** The shelf of books was poorly stacked.

c) The committee of parliamentarians (meets/meet) on a fortnightly basis.  
   **Correct:** The committee of parliamentarians meets on a fortnightly basis.

d) Shakespeare, as well as other English playwrights of the 16th century, (is/are) studied in the second year course.  
   **Correct:** Shakespeare, as well as other English playwrights of the 16th century, is studied in the second year course.

e) The task of reading essays (consumes / consume) a lot of a tutor’s time.  
   **Correct:** The task of reading essays consumes a lot of a tutor’s time.

f) The behaviour of the children (varies / vary) according to the weather.  
   **Correct:** The behaviour of the children varies according to the weather.

g) The faculty head, together with her senior staff and their secretary, (was / were) shifted to the new building.  
   **Correct:** The faculty head, together with her senior staff and their secretary, was shifted to the new building.

h) The percentage of dropouts (was / were) declining annually at the university.  
   **Correct:** The percentage of dropouts was declining annually at the university.

i) Economics (is / are) a major discipline at Flinders.  
   **Correct:** Economics is a major discipline at Flinders.

j) Two thousand dollars (buys / buy) this video camera.  
   **Correct:** Two thousand dollars buys this video camera.

k) Here (is / are) a book of modern quotations.  
   **Correct:** Here is a book of modern quotations.

l) Here (is / are) some quotations from Chairman Mao.  
   **Correct:** Here is some quotations from Chairman Mao.

m) Mr Swan and Mr Hockey (argue / argues) about economic policy for Australia.  
   **Correct:** Mr Swan and Mr Hockey argue about economic policy for Australia.

n) The spectacles (was / were) found in the Library.  
   **Correct:** The spectacles were found in the Library.

o) Each of the students (is / are) asked to fill in the form.  
   **Correct:** Each of the students is asked to fill in the form.

p) Either Cheng or Victor (is / are) the group leader.  
   **Correct:** Either Cheng or Victor is the group leader.

q) Nobody from the schools in our region (attends / attend) Flinders University.  
   **Correct:** Nobody from the schools in our region attends Flinders University.

r) Seven Little Australians (is / are) a classic children’s book.  
   **Correct:** Seven Little Australians is a classic children’s book.

**ANSWERS**

EXERCISE 1: The numbers 1-9 matching the examples:

EXERCISE 2:

EXERCISE 3:

EXERCISE 4: