

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT



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.

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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*
- b) **Usually singular:** *aid (meaning 'assistance'), research*
- c) **Always plural** (ie verb in plural form): *people, police, cattle*
- d) **Singular and plural** (ie these words do not change; but the verb may be singular or plural according to the meaning).

The news was very good.

His research is progressing very well.

The police are doing their best to control the traffic.

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:

- The **child is** ready.
- Her **parents are** waiting.
- The **case** of oranges **is** bad.
- The **trucks** of sand **are** arriving.
- Twenty-five years** of marriage **is** a long time.
- Three kilometres** **is** not far.
- Jack**, not Jill, **is** to blame.
- The **crowd is** a record.
- The **crowd are** fighting amongst themselves.
- Spectacles are** usually cheaper than contact lenses.
- Measles is** a disease which can cause blindness and death.
- The **news was** not good.
- There **are** lots of **rooms** in the house.
- There **is** lots of room on the bus.
- The **amount** of supporters **was** overwhelming.

EXERCISE 2

Choose the verb that correctly completes the sentence:

- Meat with potatoes (is/are) my brother's favourite meal.
- The box of texts (is/are) filled with various colours.
- The list of items (include/includes) everything you will need for the trip.
- My brother, who has three children, (is/are) visiting us this Christmas.
- The cost of repairs for the car (was/were) very high.
- The nature of the problems (is/are) not known.
- The percentage of absences in schools across the nation (have/has) been increasing.
- The captain and his men (was/were) able to fight off the invaders.
- Mathematics (is/are) a difficult subject for me.
- Ninety dollars for a pair of shoes (is/are) ridiculous.
- Mumps (cause/causes) the salivary glands to swell.
- Measles (is/are) contagious.
- Riches (is/are) not easy to obtain.
- Fifty years (is/are) a short time in history.
- Here (is/are) a list of classes we can attend.
- Here (is/are) some ways of organising ourselves.
- There (is/are) too many students in my group.

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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*
2. In addition, a singular subject remains singular when other nouns are connected to it by: *with, together with, except, as well as*
3. **However**, a compound subject made up of two or more nouns joined by *and* requires a plural verb.
4. Book titles take a singular verb.

- **Each is** expected to know.

- **The man with** the little girl is over there.

- **The man and the woman are** sitting quietly.

- *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*.
6. Mathematical computations may take either a singular or plural verb. You must be consistent, though, in any piece of work.
7. When two subjects are joined by 'or' or 'nor', the verb is singular or plural depending on which subject is nearer to it.

- **None of us is** perfect.
- **All is** well.
- **None are** so good that they can claim perfection.
- **All are** at the station

- Six and six **is** twelve.
- Six and six **are** twelve.

- Either the tutor or the **students** in his class **are** in the right. .

When this rule results in an awkward sounding sentence, it is better to rewrite it in a way that is both correct and more natural.

- Neither John nor **Jeremy is willing** to sacrifice his job

8. A sentence beginning with '**There**' poses problems. '**There**' is not the subject.
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.

- There **are** six **runners** in the race.
- There **is** a Davis Cup **match** on television.

- 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.

(adapted from Jordan, RR 1990, *Academic writing course*, 2nd edn, Collins ELT, London.)



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EXERCISE 3

Correct the following:

- a) Everyone think they are considerate.
- b) None of us are blameless.
- c) The van with its canopy have been lost in the flood.
- d) Each are ready to go.
- e) The Queen and the bodyguard is arriving at the hotel.
- f) All the preparations is done.
- g) Everybody who ever met him want to go to the dinner.

EXERCISE 4

Choose the verb that correctly completes the sentence:

- a) Writing with footnotes **(is/are)** informative.
- b) The shelf of books **(was/were)** poorly stacked.
- c) The committee of parliamentarians **(meets/meet)** on a fortnightly basis.
- d) Shakespeare, as well as other English playwrights of the 16th century, **(is/are)** studied in the second year course.
- e) The task of reading essays **(consumes / consume)** a lot of a tutor's time.
- f) The behaviour of the children **(varies / vary)** according to the weather.
- g) The faculty head, together with her senior staff and their secretary, **(was / were)** shifted to the new building.
- h) The percentage of dropouts **(was / were)** declining annually at the university.
- i) Economics **(is / are)** a major discipline at Flinders.
- j) Two thousand dollars **(buys / buy)** this video camera.
- k) Here **(is / are)** a book of modern quotations.
- l) Here **(is / are)** some quotations from Chairman Mao.
- m) Mr Swan and Mr Hockey **(argue / argues)** about economic policy for Australia.
- n) The spectacles **(was / were)** found in the Library.
- o) Each of the students **(is / are)** asked to fill in the form.
- p) Either Cheng or Victor **(is / are)** the group leader.
- q) Nobody from the schools in our region **(attends / attend)** Flinders University.
- r) Seven Little Australians **(is / are)** a classic children's book.

ANSWERS

EXERCISE 1: The numbers 1-9 matching the examples

a) 3	b) 3	c) 8	d) 3	e) 8	f) 8	g) 7	h) 6
i) 6	j) 8	k) 8	l) 9	m) 3	n) 3	o) 5	

EXERCISE 2:

a) is	b) is	c) includes	d) is	e) was	f) is	g) has	h) were	i) is
j) is	k) causes	l) is	m) are	n) is	o) is	p) are	q) are	

EXERCISE 3:

a) thinks	b) is	c) has	d) is	e) are	f) are	g) wants	
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EXERCISE 4:

a) is	b) was	c) meets	d) is	e) consumes	f) varies	g) was	h) was	i) is
j) buys	k) is	l) are	m) argue	n) were	o) is	p) is	q) attends	r) is