

Agreement in Writing

The basic structures and modifiers of a sentence are bound together by meaning, relationship words, and word order. Another way of making the elements of a sentence cohere is the relating of significant forms. This relating of forms is called agreement.

Agreement of Subject and Verb

Agreement occurs when a structure changes its form because of the influence of another structure. In English, nominal subjects influence the forms of finite verbs; nominals also influence the forms of pronouns. In some European languages, a noun will influence the form of the article that comes before it. Thus in Spanish we find *la television* and *el futbol*: *la* is used because the noun is feminine; *el* is used because the noun is masculine. In English, distinctions are occasionally based on gender, but number is the most common ground on which agreement is based.

Subject and Verb Agreement by Number

The rule for number agreement is not difficult. A singular subject requires a singular verb; a plural subject requires a plural verb. To apply the rule, however, you must be able to do three things: remember that the subject controls the verb form and not be distracted by other structures which may stand close to the verb; be able to determine the number of the subject; and finally, know the correct singular and plural forms of the verb.

Selection of the Subject to Control the Number of the Verb Form

In the sentence *One of our ships is missing* there is a temptation to let the plural noun *ships*, which stands by the verb, control the verb form because *ships* sounds peculiar. The temptation must be resisted, for it is the more remote word *one*, the subject of the verb, which controls the number of the verb. There are several circumstances where another structure may distract the writer from remembering that the subject controls the number of the verb form.

(1) *The verb agrees with the subject, not with the elements in the modifier of the subject.*

Each of the sofas is ninety inches long.

A swarm of bees is coming towards us.

The men in the district office have organized a ball team.

[*Sofas, bees, and office* stand close to the verb, but they do not control the form of the verb; the subject does.]

(2) *The verb agrees with the subject even if the following modifier sounds and looks like a coordinator joining two nouns.*

Several prepositions have a strong coordinating sense, such as *including, together with, along with, no less than, in addition to, and as well as*, but the verb that follows must agree with the noun subject that is modified by the prepositional phrase.

The mayor, as well as the councilmen, has been implicated. [*Mayor* is the singular subject which controls the form of the singular verb *has been implicated*.]

(3) *The verb agrees with the subject, not with the following complement.*

The greatest nuisance is the refunds we have to make.

The children of today are the hope of tomorrow.

[The complement nouns *refunds* and *hope* do not control the verb form. They must be moved into the subject position of the sentence to become the subjects of their sentences: *The hope of tomorrow is the children of today.*]

(4) *If for any reason the subject is moved out of the subject position, it will still control the verb form as another nominal is not moved into its place.*

Ramon and Eduardo are at the jai alai game.

Where are Ramon and Eduardo? [The sentence has been transformed into a question, and *Ramon and Eduardo* is still the subject of the sentence.]

There were *twelve players* on the field.

[*There* has been moved into the subject position, but it means nothing; it is an expletive, a space filler, and *twelve players* is still the subject of the sentence as is *a fight* in the sentence *There was a fight on the field.* The subjects control the verb forms.]

There is one exception to the rule. The word *it* also can function as an expletive displacing the subject of the sentence. However, because it is also a singular pronoun, it controls the verb even if the subject is plural.

It is ambitious executives who catch the early train. [*Ambitious executives* is the plural subject, but it is the expletive *it* which controls the verb form *is.*]

Usually the subject displaced by *it* is obviously singular so that it doesn't really matter what controls the singular verb form.

It is rumored *that he is about to resign.* [The noun clause is the singular subject of the Sentence.]

Selection of the Correct Number of the Noun Subject to Control the Verb Form

Most problems in subject-verb agreement occur because the number of the noun or nouns functioning as the subject is not always apparent. The fish can be singular or plural despite its singular form. The news is always singular despite its plural form.

(1) *Some nouns in the plural form can be singular in meaning, or they can be plural in meaning. Trousers, tongs, wages, tactics, pliers, scissors, odds and barracks are plural in meaning. Therefore they require a plural verb.*

The scissors are in the lefthand drawer.

Billiards, news, mathematics, linguistics, mumps, and measles are singular in meaning. Therefore they require a singular verb.

Measles *is* a communicable disease. [Some people do say, however, that Measles are catching.]

(2) *Some nouns in the plural form can be both singular and plural. When they denote fields of knowledge or activity, they are singular; in most other uses, they are plural.*

Politics *has* always attracted persons of talent.

The politics of the situation *are* complicated.

Statistics *is* not always a dry subject.

The statistics *were* largely erroneous.

(3) *Some nouns which specify an amount of something are singular when the things or people involved are regarded as a unit. In this case, they take a singular verb.*

Two plus two *is* four.

Two-thirds of the sweater *has* been completed.

Eight pounds of grapes *seems* a lot.

Ten percent of their capital *has* been absorbed already.

Ten percent of the men drafted *are* over thirty. [Here the men are regarded as individuals, not as a unit.]

(3) *Collective nouns are usually singular but can be plural. If the collective is regarded as a unit, the collective noun is singular and requires a singular verb.*

The orchestra *performs* well under any conductor.

The family *is* coming over this afternoon.

If, however, members of the collective are considered individually, the collective noun is plural and requires a plural verb.

The family *were* informed as soon as they could be reached by telephone.

[Members of the family were informed individually by means of several telephone calls.]

(5) The number of some foreign plurals can be confused where a plural is mistaken for a singular.

*The public media *is* in trouble. [Media is plural in form and meaning; therefore the verb should be plural. The public media *are* in trouble.]

*This phenomena *fascinates* him. [These phenomena *fascinate* him.]

Selection of the Correct Number of the Compound Subject to Control the Verb Form

(1) *A compound subject coordinated by "and" is nearly always plural and requires a plural verb form.*

Mink and sable *are* expensive furs.

The senator and his wife *were* warmly received.

If, however, the compound subject refers to just one person or thing, then the verb form is singular.

A scholar and a gentleman *is* what he strives to be. [one person]

This prelude and fugue *is* by Bach. [one composition]

When the compound subject refers to closely related things, it can be singular or plural depending on the closeness of the relationship. In borderline cases, the singular form of the following verb sounds better.

The courage and patriotism of De Gaulle *were* cherished by many Frenchmen in 1940. [The two qualities are related but distinct from each other; so the plural verb form is used.]

The protection and feeding of young fledglings *is* the constant preoccupation of the adult birds. [The two qualities seem so close that the singular verb form is used.]

(2) *Singular nouns coordinated by "or," "either ... or," "neither... nor," or by "not only ... but also" are regarded as a singular subject and require a singular verb form.*

Not only the mother but also the child was badly dehydrated.
 Either the muffler or the tailpipe was replaced.
 Neither time nor prosperity has softened his heart.
 I think Armando or Helen has our passports.

When these coordinating conjunctions join plural nouns, the verb is plural.
 (Neither the Saints nor the Packers *are* going to win this year.) When these conjunctions join singular and plural nouns, then the verb agrees in number with the closer noun to it.

Neither his advisors nor the President himself *has* acted wisely in this crisis. [President is closer to the verb.]
 Either the cloth or the dyes *are* defective. [Dyes is closer to the verb.]

Some writers dislike this construction and recast the sentence to avoid it.
 Either the cloth *was* defective or the dyes *were*.

Selection of the Correct Number of the Pronoun Subject to Control the Verb Form

(1) *Most indefinite pronouns are regarded as singular pronouns and require a singular verb form.*

Somebody across the street is playing a trombone.
 As yet nobody has challenged my theory.
 Each of the sofas is over ninety inches long. [The singular pronoun *each*, not the plural noun *sofas*, controls the verb form.]
 Everybody in the room was getting sleepy. [Despite the fact that everybody is obviously plural in meaning, it is a singular pronoun in the standard dialect.]

Some of these indefinite pronouns can work as determiners before singular nouns, and although there may be a strong feeling that more than one thing is involved, the verb form is still singular.

Neither idea was any good. [Although the speaker is talking about two ideas being no good, in the standard dialect the verb form must be singular.]
 Each baby chick was inspected to establish its sex. [Thousands of chicks were probably being processed this way, but the singular noun *chick* and the singular meaning of *each* demand that the verb be singular in form.]

(2) *A few indefinite pronouns such as "many," "several," and "few" refer to more than one person or thing. These pronouns are plural and take plural verb forms.*

Several have already been tested.
 Many are called, but few are chosen.

The nouns *variety* and *number* also take plural verb forms when they are preceded by *a*. When they are preceded by *the*, they are singular.

A variety of fish *abound* in these waters.

A number of horsemen *were* on the hill.

The number of horsemen on the hill *was* not great.

(3) Like collective nouns, some indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural depending on whether they refer to a quantity or individual units of something.

Some of the cereal is wormy. [a quantity of cereal]

Some of the apples are rotten. (several individual apples)

Most of the money is gone; so are most of the people.

[A quantity of money and several people have disappeared.]

The pronoun *none* behaves in a similar fashion; in addition, it can be singular when the meaning of *not one of the individuals* is intended.

Luckily, none of the property was damaged; none of the horses were hurt; but none of us is blameless in this matter.

Exercise 1

Directions: In some of the sentences below, the subjects and verbs agree; in others they do not. If the sentence is correct, write C in the space to the left. If the subject and verb do not agree, correct the sentence.

1. Neither of the jellies are clear.
2. Every candidate has been tested and several has already been appointed.
3. One of the convicts have escaped.
4. A band of gypsies has been camping here.
5. Neither the omelet nor the cereal was edible.
6. Our greatest joy are our children.
7. None of the tubes have been tested.
8. Two-thirds of black college students is enrolled in predominantly white institutions.
9. Our greatest problem this year is the Japanese beetles.

- 10. A school of dolphins were sighted near the jetty.
- 11. Every policy and every contract have been carefully scrutinized.
- 12. In this poem the rhythm and the meter is awry.
- 13. The statistics have been compiled carefully.
- 14. Romeo and Juliet is frequently performed.
- 15. Neither of the wills have been properly drawn.
- 16. Azalea is one of those plants that was once considered a botanical genus.
- 17. In the lake there is two large islands.
- 18. Twenty years are a harsh sentence for that crime.
- 19. The barracks built as temporary structures in 1942 are still standing.
- 20. Because of civil disturbances the legion were recalled to Rome.
- 21. In this district our greatest problem are the undernourished and diseased children.
- 22. In this period of repression, where is the men of principle?
- 23. The major, as well as several non-commissioned officers, were charged with black market operations.
- 24. Neither the washing machine nor the dryer is rated satisfactory.
- 25. The Birds is the title of a play by Aristophanes.

Exercise 2

Directions: Each of the sentences below contains two forms of one verb. Find the subject of the verb and then choose the form of the verb which agrees with it. Write both the subject and the correct form of the verb in the spaces to the right. If the verb is governed by two or more subjects, write both of them in the appropriate space.

EXAMPLES:

	Subject	Verb
Every article (has, have) been inspected.	article	has
The road and the driveway (need, needs) repair	road and driveway	need

1. A selection of his short poems (has, have) been made for publication.		
2. (Do, does) economics interest you?		
3. Allison, Twist and Turner, Inc. (was, were) the successful bidder.		
4. (Doesn't, don't) the vestrymen support the bishop?		
5. He is one of the three youths who (was, were) chosen to accompany Admiral Byrd.		
6. There (is, are) several reasons for blaming him.		
7. Eight percent of the food (is, are) spoiled.		
8. (Has, have) half of the foundation been dug?		
9. The wages of sin (is, are) death.		
10. (Has, have) the wages of office workers risen in this quarter?		
11. (Is, are) international news adequately covered by our rural press?		
12. (Was, were) the team arguing about who should be their captain?		
13. Do you agree that the children (is, are) the hope of the world?		
14. Her one pleasure (was, were) her beautiful dresses.		
15. Her beautiful dresses (was, were) her one pleasure.		
16. His tax refund, together with the little he manages to save, (covers, cover) the cost of his vacation.		
17. Neither the president nor his advisors (has, have) acted wisely in this crisis.		
18. Either the cloth or the dyes (is, are) defective.		
19. Every tree and every shrub (has, have) been blighted.		
20. A band of partisans (is, are) harassing our lines.		
21. The miners of West Virginia and Pennsylvania (is, are) suffering from unemployment		
22. (Is, are) there many kinds of game in this area?		
23. Some of the butter (is, are) rancid.		
24. Most of the apples (is, are) wormy.		
25. There (is, are) several strong reasons for		

discontinuing production.		
---------------------------	--	--

Exercise 3

Each of the sentences below contains two forms of one verb. Find the subject of the verb and then choose the form of the verb which agrees with it. Write both the subject and the correct form of the verb in the spaces to the right. If the verb is governed by two or more subjects, write all of them in the appropriate space.

EXAMPLES:	Subject	Verb
Every article (has, have) been inspected.	article	has
The road and the driveway (needs, need) repair.	road and driveway	need

EXAMPLES:	Subject	Verb
1. Twice a year the council (holds, hold) a public meeting.		
2. There (has, have) been no objections to the proposed loan		
3. The President, guarded by secret service men, (takes, take) a brisk walk every morning		
4. To the economist statistics (is, are) an important subject.		
5. To the economist a knowledge of statistics (is, are) important		
6. Each of the elementary schools (is, are) equipped with a gymnasium		
7. A package of food (is, are) sent each month.		
8. One of our most popular designs (is, are) the snowflake.		
9. Which of the two proposals (has, have) been accepted?		
10. Here (lies, lie) the soldiers and sailors of the last war.		
11. Most of the accounts (has, have) been audited.		
12. All of the trans-Atlantic planes (is, are) jets.		
13. The supervisor and several of the inspectors (has, have) been indicted for bribery.		
14. The supervisor, together with several inspectors, (has, have) been indicted for bribery.		
15. (Has, have) either Perkins and Company or Paul Fleischer Associates submitted a bid?		
16. A successful wife, mother, and career woman (is, are) what she wants to be.		
17. Exceptions (is, are) the test of the rule.		
18. The test of the rule (is, are) the exceptions.		

19. When (do, does) the bus leave for Albany?		
20. For adult males mumps (is, are) a serious disease.		