Compound Subjects

Different rules of agreement apply when the words or, nor, or and are used to join two or more subjects.

Singular Subjects Joined by Or or Nor. Both or and nor require a singular verb when each part of a compound subject is singular.

Two or more singular subjects joined by or or nor must have a singular verb.

In the following example, the conjunction or joins two singular subjects and indicates a singular compound subject.

EXAMPLE: Either green or blue is a suitable color for the background.

Plural Subjects Joined by Or or Nor. Of course, a plural counterpart to the preceding rule is necessary.

Two or more plural subjects joined by or or nor must have a plural verb.

EXAMPLE: Neither the paints nor the brushes are in the studio.

Subjects of Mixed Number Joined by Or or Nor. When the subjects joined by or or nor are mixed in number, determining the number of the verb is slightly more difficult.

If one or more subjects are singular and the others are plural and they are joined by or or nor, the subject closest to the verb determines the agreement.

In the first of the following examples, the subject nearest the verb, candles, is plural and, therefore, requires a plural verb: were used. In the next example, the order of the subjects is changed. Now the singular subject lamp is nearest the verb; therefore, a singular verb, was used, is necessary.

EXAMPLES: At one time a whale-oil lantern and a kerosene lamp were used to light the front hall.
At one time kerosene lamps and candles were used to light the front hall.
At one time candles and a kerosene lamp were used to light the front hall.

Compound Subjects Joined by And. A single rule applies to most situations in which and joins two or more subjects.

A compound subject joined by and is generally plural and must have a plural verb.

Regardless of whether the parts of the compound subject are all singular, all plural, or mixed in number, the conjunction and usually signals the need for a plural verb.

EXAMPLES: At one time a whale-oil lantern and a kerosene lamp were used to light the front hall.
At one time kerosene lamps and candles were used to light the front hall.
At one time candles and a kerosene lamp were used to light the front hall.

Exceptions occur (1) when the parts of the compound subject equal one thing and (2) when the word each or every is used before a compound subject. Either of these situations requires a singular verb.

SINGULAR COMPOUND SUBJECTS: Bread and butter was all that they offered us.

Every chart and diagram was drawn with precision.

EXERCISE E: Making Compound Subjects Agree with Their Verbs. Write the compound subject from each of the following sentences on your paper. Then choose the correct verb from the choices in parentheses. Be prepared to tell which rule applies.

1. Each crack and crevice in the sidewalk (was, were) filled with cement.
2. The many days of waiting and weeks of uncertainty (has, have) kept Miriam in an anxious state.
3. Several dentists and a few dentists (was, were) found strewn across the ancient battlefield.
4. Glass, wood, tile, or other materials (is, are) used to create beautiful mosaics.
5. Coal or wood (is, are) burned in this stove.
6. Probably neither Jupiter, Saturn, nor the other outer planets (is, are) capable of sustaining life.
7. A hammer and a screwdriver (is, are) all that you will need.
8. Thrilling rides and an exciting midway (draws, draw) people to the annual fair.
9. Neither threats nor coaxing (causes, cause) Art to be swayed from a decision.
10. Ham and eggs (is, are) my favorite breakfast.
11. Several household utensils and a bronze cauldron (has, have) been recovered from the burial mound.
12. Neither redwoods nor giant sequoias (grows, grow) in this part of the country.
13. The cost of the eye examination and the price for new glasses (was, were) paid for by my parents.
14. Leather coats or vinyl jackets (is, are) being worn this year.
15. Every table and chair in this house (was, were) built by my great-grandfather.
16. A book or a magazine (helps, help) to pass the time spent on the bus.
17. Either expertly applied paint or varnish (has, have) given a professional look to these wooden dressers.
18. Either the elevator or the escalators (takes, take) you to the housewares department.
19. The antique cup and saucer (was, were) neatly displayed on a wooden stand.
20. Beside the fireplace two calico cats and a spotted dog (was, were) waiting for our return.

Agreement with Other Kinds of Subjects

The rules covered thus far in this section are the ones that most often apply to subject-verb agreement. However, some subjects, because of their position within a sentence or because of their form, can be confusing. The rest of this section will explain how verbs must agree with these potentially confusing subjects.

Subjects in Inverted Sentences. In a sentence where the usual subject-verb order is reversed, it is easy to make an error in agreement.

A verb that comes before its subject must still agree with it in number.

Sentences are inverted for several different reasons. In the first of the following examples, the sentence pattern is inverted for emphasis. The singular subject chick agrees with the singular verb was. The subject-verb agreement is unaffected by the prepositional phrase at the beginning of the sentence. In the second example, there signals a verb-subject pattern. The last sentence is an inverted question.

EXAMPLES: Under the hen’s wings was a tiny chick.
There are your coat and gloves.
Aren’t those frayed ropes dangerous?

One exception to this rule occurs when the expletive it begins a sentence. Then, the verb is always singular, even if the subject is plural.

EXAMPLES: It was they whose lives were threatened.
It was my friends and I who made the noise.

NOTE ABOUT THERE’S AND HERE’S: A common mistake is the misuse of there’s and here’s, contractions for there is and here is. As singular constructions, they cannot agree with plural subjects.

INCORRECT: Here’s Ann and Tanya now.
CORRECT: Here are Ann and Tanya now.

Subjects of Linking Verbs. Another agreement problem involves linking verbs and predicate nominatives.

A linking verb must always agree with its subject, regardless of the number of its predicate nominative.

If, for example, the subject of a linking verb is plural and the predicate nominative is singular, remember that it is always the subject that determines the verb’s number.

EXAMPLES: Rockets were the signal to begin the battle.
The signal to begin the battle was rockets.

Collective Nouns. Collective nouns—words such as jury, family, or committee—name groups of persons or things. They may be either singular or plural depending on the meaning you assign to them.

A collective noun is singular and agrees with a singular verb when the group if names is considered to be a single unit.

A collective noun is plural and agrees with a plural verb when the group if names is considered to be individuals with different feelings or points of view.
**Indefinite Pronouns.** Indefinite pronouns used as subjects are often a source of confusion.

Depending on its form and meaning, an indefinite pronoun can agree with either a singular or a plural verb.

Refer to the list of indefinite pronouns in Section 1.1. Notice that some are always singular. Included here are those ending in -one (anyone, everyone, someone), those ending in -body (anybody, everybody, somebody), and those that imply one (each, either). Others are always plural: both, few, many, others, and several. A few can be either singular or plural: all, any, more, most, none, and some. Review the list until you can recognize the number of any indefinite pronoun.

Following are examples from each category.

**ALWAYS SINGULAR:**
- Almost everyone likes his music.
- Everybody is expected to be here tomorrow.
- Neither of the dresses looks good on you.

**ALWAYS PLURAL:**
- Both of these shoes squeak.
- Many in the class excel in writing.
- Others overlook the difficulties.

**EITHER SINGULAR OR PLURAL:**
- Most of the pie was eaten.
- Most of the hinges have been oiled.

When the indefinite pronoun is one that can be either singular or plural, the pronoun’s antecedent determines the pronoun’s number. In the first of the preceding examples, the antecedent of most is pie, a singular noun; therefore, most is singular. In the second example, the antecedent of most is hinges, a plural noun; therefore, most is also plural.

**NOTE ABOUT MANY, A, NONE, AND ANY:** Many a always precedes a singular subject. A singular subject must agree with a singular verb.

**EXAMPLE:** Many a vegetable dish has been ruined by over-cooking.

None and any occasionally are singular even when they have plural antecedents. In this situation, none means “not one” and any means “any one.”
EXAMPLES:  None of their friends is attending the party.

Isn’t any of my relatives sent me a birthday card?

Titles. The titles of books and other works of art can be misleading if they sound plural or consist of many words.

A title is singular and must have a singular verb.

EXAMPLES:  Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a psychological thriller.

The Gleaners by Jean François Millet depicts peasant women working in a field.

Amounts and Measurements. Other kinds of subjects that sound plural but can actually be singular are amounts and measurements.

A noun expressing an amount or measurement is usually singular and must usually have a singular verb.

In the first three of the following examples, the subjects agree with singular verbs: Twenty-five cents is a single sum of money; four tablespoons, a single measurement; and three fourths, one part of a whole. In the last example, however, half refers to many individual items and is therefore plural.

EXAMPLES:  Twenty-five cents starts the dryer in the laundromat.

Four tablespoons of salt has made the soup inedible.

Three fourths of that nation is impoverished.

Half of the leaflets were carelessly scattered over the parking lot.

EXERCISE F: Making Confusing Subjects Agree with Their Verbs. Divide your paper into three columns, labeling them Subject, Singular or Plural, and Verb. For each of the following sentences, find the subject and write it in the first column. Then decide whether its meaning is singular or plural and write your answer in the second column. Finally, choose the correct verb from the choices in parentheses and write it in the third column.

1. As usual our swimming team (is, are) trying to recover from its latest defeat.

2. Here (is, are) the different options for your consideration.

3. Written by the British author Thackeray, The Virginians (is, are) set in colonial America.

4. His tactics at first (seems, seem) to be self-serving.

5. The herd of bewildered cattle (is, are) milling about aimlessly inside the enclosure.

6. His mumbled apology and its obvious insincerity (was, were) my reason for disliking him.

7. Two gallons of whitewash (is, are) all that we need for these basement walls.

8. The newspaper media (covers, cover) both national and international events.

9. Thermodynamics (is, are) concerned with the relations between heat and mechanical energy.

10. Her broken eyeglasses (was, were) lying on the ground.

11. Franz Liszt’s Les Préludes (is, are) a symphonic poem written for orchestra.

12. A swarm of killer bees (is, are) slowly advancing northward.

13. A good idea for raising money (is, are) having everyone demonstrate a craft and having people sign up for lessons.

14. Twenty dollars (includes, include) the price of the room and a continental breakfast.

15. At the beginning of the play, a group of girls, some walking, others skipping, (enters, enter) singing.

16. To and fro in their narrow cage (paces, pace) the tawny lions.

17. All of his change (was, were) tossed onto the table.

18. At this moment few (remains, remain) in the room.

19. The clergy (is, are) divided over minor issues in doctrine.

20. Mumps (is, are) a dangerous disease in adults.

21. Eugene’s faltering steps (was, were) the first sign of his recovery from a long period of illness.

22. Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife (was, were) painted by Jan Van Eyck.

23. Nearly half of the hamsters (was, were) rejected by their mother.

24. Any of these furnaces (does, do) a good job of heating a house.

25. A number of quails (is, are) hiding in the underbrush.

APPLICATION: Applying the Rules of Subject and Verb Agreement. Complete each of the following sentences with an appropriate present-tense form of a verb. Be prepared to cite which rule of subject-verb agreement you used to complete each sentence.

1. The receptive audience _________ even the worst of the acting.
2. Biogenetics ________ by Professor Randolph, an inspired teacher.
3. Those plants and flowers whose leaves are brown ______ in need of care.
4. Blurred vision and headaches ________ the first indication of his illness.
5. Kathy is one of the few students in her class who ______ all of the assignments.
6. None of the radishes or cucumbers ________ ready to be picked.
7. "Calloused" or "insensitive" best ________ her character.
8. Here ________ five dollars, which is all I am able to contribute.
9. Pelting rains or strong winds ________ the bare soil.
10. Spaghetti and meatballs ________ here for lunch every Wednesday.
11. The clown with the orange nose and over-sized shoes _____ funny.
12. Churchill, together with Roosevelt and Stalin, ________ the Yalta Conference.
13. The confetti ________ in small cardboard boxes.
14. Once again our family ________ turns doing the more objectionable household tasks.
15. Neither water nor chemicals effectively ________ a fire like this one.

7.2 Pronoun and Antecedent Agreement

Pronoun and Antecedent Agreement

Like a subject and its verb, a pronoun and its antecedent must agree. An antecedent is the word or group of words for which the pronoun stands. (See Section 1.1 for a more detailed definition of the term antecedent.)

Agreement Between Personal Pronouns and Antecedents

While a subject and verb must agree simply in number, a personal pronoun and its antecedent must agree in three ways.

A personal pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, person, and gender.

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Number, as you may already know, refers to a word's being either singular or plural. Person refers to a pronoun's ability to indicate either the person speaking (first person); the person spoken to (second person); or the person, place, or thing spoken about (third person). Gender is the characteristic of nouns and pronouns that indicates whether the word is masculine (referring to males); feminine (referring to females), or neuter (referring to neither males nor females).

The only personal pronouns that, in themselves, indicate gender are third person and singular. The following chart lists these personal pronouns and some nouns according to gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER OF NOUNS AND PERSONAL PRONOUNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nephew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following example illustrates the way in which a pronoun and its antecedent must agree in the three areas of number, person, and gender. The antecedent stewardess is singular in number, is in the third person, and is feminine in gender. Her agrees with the antecedent since it too is singular, third-person, and feminine.

EXAMPLE: The stewardess disregarded her own safety to help the passengers escape the burning plane.

Agreement in Number Between Personal Pronouns and Compound Antecedents. When an antecedent is compound, making the pronoun agree can be a problem. Keep the following three rules in mind when determining the number of compound antecedents.

In general use a plural personal pronoun with two or more antecedents joined by and.

PLURAL: Melissa and I are studying for our exams.

In general use a singular personal pronoun with two or more singular antecedents joined by or or nor.