

# 18

## Agreement

### 150 Summary

#### Singular and plural verbs • 151

Subject-verb agreement means choosing the correct singular or plural verb after the subject.

*The shop opens at nine.      The shops open at nine.*

#### Points to note about number and agreement

#### Singular and plural subjects • 152

*Phil and Janice have invited us round.*  
*Two hours is a long time to wait.*

#### One of, a number of, every, there etc • 153

*A number of problems have arisen.*  
*Every cloud has a silver lining.*

#### Nouns with a plural form • 154

*Physics is my favourite subject.*

#### Pair nouns • 155

*These shorts are nice.*

#### Group nouns • 156

*The company is/are building a new factory.*

#### Number in the subject and object • 157

*We all wrote down our names.*

#### NOTE

For *The dead are not forgotten*, • 204.

For *The French have a word for it*, • 288(1d).

### 151 Singular and plural verbs

- 1 In the third person there is sometimes agreement between the subject and the first (or only) word of a finite verb phrase.

*The house is empty.      The houses are empty.*

Here we use *is* with a singular subject and *are* with a plural.

An uncountable noun takes a singular verb.

*The grass is getting long.*

With a present-tense verb there is agreement.

*The **window is** broken.*                      *The **windows are** broken.*  
*The **office has** a phone.*                      *The **offices have** phones.*  
*The **garden looks** nice.*                      *The **gardens look** nice.*

There is agreement with *be*, • 84(2), *have*, • 85(2), and a present-simple verb (*look*). A third-person singular subject takes a verb form in *s*.

NOTE

a A modal verb always has the same form.

*The **window(s) might** be broken.*

b For the subjunctive, • 242.

*We recommend that **the pupil receive** a special award.*

3 With a past-tense verb there is agreement only with *be*.

*The **window was** broken.*                      *The **windows were** broken.*

With other verbs, there is only one past form.

*The **office(s) had** lots of phones.*                      *The **garden(s) looked** nice.*

NOTE

For the subjunctive *were*, • 242(3).

*If the story **were** true, what would it matter?*

## 152 Singular and plural subjects

It is usually easy to decide if a subject is singular or plural, but there are some points to note.

1 TWO or more phrases linked by *and* take a plural verb.

***Jamie and Emma go** sailing at weekends.*  
***Both the kitchen and the dining-room face** due west.*  
***Wheat and maize are** exported.*

But when the two together express something that we see as a single thing, then we use a singular verb.

***Bread and butter was** all we had.*

2 When two phrases are linked by *or*, the verb usually agrees with the nearest.

*Either **Thursday** or **Friday is** OK.*  
*Either my sister or **the neighbours are** looking after the dog.*

3 A phrase of measurement takes a singular verb.

***Ten miles is** too far to walk.                      **Thirty pounds seems** a reasonable price.*

Here we are talking about the amount as a whole - *a distance* of ten miles, *a sum* of thirty pounds, not the individual miles or pounds.

Titles and names also take a singular verb when they refer to one thing.

*'**Star Wars**' was* a very successful film.  
***The Rose and Crown is** that old pub by the river.*

4 A phrase with *as well as* or *with* does not make the subject plural.

***George, together with some of his friends, is** buying a race-horse.*

A phrase with *and* in brackets does not normally make the subject plural.

***The kitchen** (and of course the dining-room) **faces** due west.*

After *not only... but also*, the verb agrees with the nearest phrase.

*Not only George but also his friends are buying the horse.*

NOTE

A phrase in apposition does not make the subject plural.

*George, my neighbour, often goes to the races.*

- 5 If a phrase comes after the noun, the verb agrees with the first noun.  
*The house between the two bungalows is empty.*
- 6 A phrase or clause as subject takes a singular verb.  
*Through the trees is the quickest way.*  
*Opening my presents was exciting.*
- 7 Even if the subject comes after the verb, the verb agrees with the subject.  
*A great attraction are the antique shops in the old part of the town.*  
Here *a great attraction* is the complement. It describes the subject, *the antique shops*.

## 153 *One of, a number of, every, there etc*

- 1 After a subject with *one of*, we use a singular verb.  
*One of these letters is for you.*
- 2 When a plural noun follows *number of, majority of or a lot of*, we normally use a plural verb.  
*A large number of letters were received.*  
*The majority of people have complained.*  
*A lot of people have complained.*  
Here *a number of etc* expresses a quantity.

NOTE

a When *number* means 'figure', it agrees with the verb.

*The number of letters we receive is increasing.*

b *Amount* agrees with the verb.

*A large amount of money was collected. Large amounts of money were collected.*

c After a fraction, the verb agrees with the following noun, e.g. *potato, plants*.

*Three quarters (of a potato) is water.*

*Almost half (the plants) were killed.*

- 3 We use a singular verb after a subject with *every* and *each* and compounds with *every, some, any* and *no*.  
*Every pupil has to take a test.*  
*Each day was the same as the one before.*  
*Everyone has to take a test.*  
*Someone was waiting at the door.*  
*Nothing ever happens in this place.*

But *all* and *some* with a plural noun take a plural verb.

*All the pupils have to take a test.*

*Some people were waiting at the door.*

NOTE

When *each* follows a plural subject, the verb is plural.

*The pupils each have to take a test.*

We use a singular verb after *who* or *what*.

**Who knows the answer?** ~ *We all do.*

**What's happened?** ~ *Several things.*

After *what/which* + noun, the verb agrees with the noun.

**What/Which day is convenient?**      **What/Which days are convenient?**

NOTE

A verb after *which* is singular or plural depending on how many we are talking about.

**Which (of these sweaters) goes best with my trousers?** ~ *This one, I think.*

**Which (of these shoes) go best with my trousers?** ~ *These, I think.*

After *none of/neither of/either of/any of*+ plural noun phrase, we can use either a singular or plural verb.

**None (of the pupils) has/have failed the test.**

**I don't know if either (of these batteries) is/are any good.**

The plural verb is more informal.

NOTE

After *no*, we can use either the singular or the plural.

**No pupil has failed/No pupils have failed the test.**

After *there*, the verb agrees with its complement.

**There was an accident.**      **There were some accidents.**

NOTE

In informal English we sometimes use *there's* before a plural.

**There's some friends of yours outside.**

## 154 Nouns with a plural form

### 1 Plural noun - plural verb

- a Some nouns are always plural.

**The goods were found to be defective.** NOT *a good*

**My belongings have been destroyed in a fire.** NOT *my belonging*

Nouns always plural are *belongings, clothes, congratulations, earnings, goods, odds* (= probability), *outskirts, particulars* (= details), *premises* (= building), *remains, riches, surroundings, thanks, troops* (= soldiers), *tropics*.

NOTE For pair nouns, e.g. *glasses, trousers*, • 155.

- b Compare these nouns.

	Plural only
<i>hurt my arm(s) and leg(s)</i>	<b>arms</b> (= weapons)
<i>an old custom</i>	<b>go through customs</b>
<b>manner</b> (= way)	<b>manners</b> (= polite behaviour)
<b>the content</b> of the message	<b>the contents of the box</b>
<i>a saving of £5</i>	<b>all my savings</b>
<i>do some damage to the car</i>	<b>pay damages</b>
<i>feel pain(s) in my back</i>	<b>take pains</b> (= care)

## 2 Plural form - singular verb

*The news isn't very good, I'm afraid.*

*Gymnastics looks difficult, and it is.*

Nouns like this are *news*; some words for subjects of study: *mathematics, statistics, physics, politics, economics*; some sports: *athletics, gymnastics, bowls*; some games: *billiards, darts, dominoes, draughts*; and some illnesses: *measles, mumps, shingles*.

NOTE

Some of these nouns can have normal singular and plural forms when they mean physical things.

*Tom laid a domino on the table.*

*These statistics are rather complicated.* (= these figures)

*Politics* takes a plural verb when it means someone's views.

*His politics are very left-wing.* (= his political opinions)

## 3 Nouns with the same singular and plural form

*A chemical works causes a lot of pollution.*

*Chemical works cause a lot of pollution.*

*Works* can mean 'a factory' or 'factories'. When it is plural we use a plural verb.

Nouns like this are *barracks, crossroads, headquarters, means, series, species, works*.

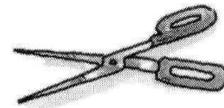
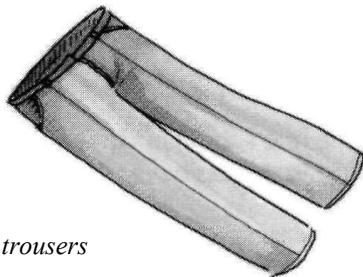
NOTE

*Works, headquarters* and *barracks* can sometimes be plural when they refer to one building or one group of buildings.

*These chemical works here cause a lot of pollution.*

# 155 Pair nouns

- 1 We use a pair noun for something made of two identical parts.



- 2 A pair noun is plural in form and takes a plural verb.

*These trousers need cleaning.*    *Your new glasses are very nice.*

*I'm looking for some scissors. Those tights are cheap.*

We cannot use *a* or numbers, NOT *a trouser* and NOT *two trousers*

NOTE

Some pair nouns can be singular before another noun: *a trouser leg, a pyjama jacket.*

But: *my glasses case.*

- 3 We can use *pair(s) of*.

*This pair of trousers needs cleaning.*

*How have three pairs of scissors managed to disappear?*

Some pair nouns are: *binoculars, glasses, jeans, pants, pincers, pliers, pyjamas, scales* (for weighing), *scissors, shorts, spectacles, tights, trousers, tweezers*.

## NOTE

- a Three of these nouns can be singular with a different meaning: **a glass** of water, **a spectacle** (= a wonderful sight), **a scale** of five kilometres to the centimetre.  
 b Most words for clothes above the waist are not pair nouns, e.g. *shirt, pullover, suit, coat*.  
 c We can also use *pair(s) of* with *socks, shoes, boots, trainers* etc. These nouns can be singular: *a shoe*.

## 156 Group nouns

- 1 Group nouns (sometimes called 'collective nouns') refer to a group of people, e.g. *family, team, crowd*. After a singular group noun, the verb can often be either singular or plural.

*The crowd **was/were** in a cheerful mood.*

There is little difference in meaning. The choice depends on whether we see the crowd as a whole or as a number of individuals.

## NOTE

- a In the USA a group noun usually takes a singular verb. • 304(1)  
 b A group noun can be plural.  
*The two **teams** know each other well.*  
 c A phrase with *of* can follow the noun, e.g. *a crowd **of people**, a team **of no-hopers**.*

- 2 With a singular verb we use *it, its* and *which/that*. With a plural verb we use *they, their* and *who/that*.

*The government **wants** to improve **its** image.*

*The government **want** to improve **their** image.*

*The crowd **which has** gathered here **is** in a cheerful mood.*

*The crowd **who have** gathered here **are** in a cheerful mood.*

- 3 We use the singular to talk about the whole group. For example, we might refer to the group's size or make-up, or how it compares with others.

*The **class consists** of twelve girls and fourteen boys.*

*The **union is** the biggest in the country.*

The plural is more likely when we talk about people's thoughts or feelings.

*The **class don't/doesn't** understand what the teacher is saying.*

*The **union are/is** delighted with their/its pay rise.*

- 4 Some group nouns are:

<i>army</i>	<i>company</i>	<i>group</i>	<i>population</i>
<i>association</i>	<i>council</i>	<i>jury</i>	<i>press</i>
<i>audience</i>	<i>crew</i>	<i>majority</i>	<i>public</i>
<i>board</i>	<i>crowd</i>	<i>management</i>	<i>school</i>
<i>choir</i>	<i>enemy</i>	<i>military</i>	<i>society (= club)</i>
<i>class</i>	<i>family</i>	<i>minority</i>	<i>staff</i>
<i>club</i>	<i>firm</i>	<i>navy</i>	<i>team</i>
<i>colleague</i>	<i>gang</i>	<i>orchestra</i>	<i>union</i>
<i>committee</i>	<i>government</i>	<i>(political) party</i>	<i>university</i>
<i>community</i>			

NOTE *Military, press* and *public* do not have a plural form. NOT *the publics*

- 5 The names of institutions, companies and teams are also group nouns, e.g. *Parliament, the United Nations, The Post Office, the BBC, Selfridge's, Rank Xerox, Manchester United, England* (= the England team).  
*Safeways sells/sell organic vegetables.*  
*Brazil is/are expected to win.*

## NOTE

The *United States* usually takes a singular verb.

*The United States has reacted angrily.*

- 6 These nouns have a plural meaning and take a plural verb: *police, people, livestock* (= farm animals), *cattle* (= cows), *poultry* (= hens).  
*The police are questioning a man.*  
*Some cattle have got out into the road.*

## NOTE

a For details about *people*, • 296(1) Note b.

b When *poultry* means meat, it is uncountable.

*Poultry has gone up in price.*

## 157 Number in the subject and object

There is sometimes a problem about number with an object. Compare these sentences.

*The schools have a careers adviser.*

(A number of schools share the same adviser.)

*The schools have careers advisers.*

(Each school has one or more advisers.)

When a number of people each have one thing, then the object is usually plural.

*We put on our coats. They all nodded their heads in agreement.*

But we use the singular after a subject with *each* or *every*.

*Each town has its own mayor.*