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

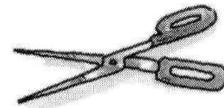
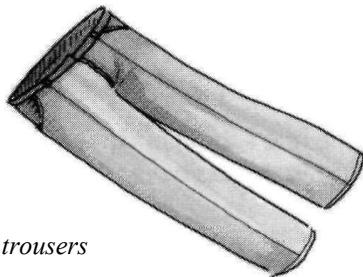
NOTE

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.