

Subject-Verb Agreement Context Exercises

Subject-verb separation: When the subject and verb of a sentence are separated by a group of words that may include one or more nouns, be sure that the verb agrees in number with the subject of the sentence, not with one of these nouns in the intervening group of words.

- The school board, as well as the local citizens, _____ (was, were) pleased with the plans for the new high school.
- The intelligence of many sea animals _____ (is, are) indeed amazing.

Singular subjects joined by *and*: When two or more singular subjects are joined by the coordinating conjunction *and*, a plural verb should be used. An exception to this occurs when the parts of a compound subject refer to one thing or person or when *each* or *every* preceded the compound subject.

- Freedom and justice _____ (was, were) two cornerstones of the democracy from the beginning.
- Every man, woman, and child _____ (was, were) taken from the village.

Singular subjects joined by *or* and *nor*: When singular subjects are joined by *or* or by *either...or* or *neither...nor*, a singular verb should be used. However, if one of the subjects is singular and the other is plural, the plural one should be placed in the second position (closer to the verb) and the verb made plural.

- Either a certified check on deposit or a valid major credit card _____ (is, are) required for one to bid on the merchandise.
- Neither the instructor nor the students _____ (want, wants) to do another watercolor.

Indefinite pronouns (I): Indefinite pronouns that end with *-body*, *-one*, or *-thing* (e.g., *somebody*, *someone*, *something*) always take a singular verb. In like manner, the indefinite pronouns *another*, *each*, *either*, *neither*, and *one* (used alone) take a singular verb. However, the indefinite pronouns *both*, *few*, *many*, *others*, and *several* always take a plural verb.

- Alas, another of these detergents _____ (has, have) proved to be harmful to the delicate skin of the househusband.
- Several in the audience _____ (was, were) beside themselves with anger at what the speaker had said.

Indefinite pronouns (II): The indefinite pronouns *all*, *any*, *more*, *most*, and *some* and other words that indicate a quantity, part, percentage, or fraction of something (e.g., *half*, *two-thirds*, *three-quarters*) may take either a singular verb or a plural verb, depending upon the number of the word they precede and refer to, which is the object of the prepositional phrase that follows the pronoun.

- Some of Herman's time _____ (was, were) taken up settling disputes among the workers.
- Forty percent of the trees _____ (was, were) scheduled for harvest.

Indefinite pronouns (III): The indefinite pronoun *none* poses peculiar problems. It always takes a singular verb when the object of the prepositional phrase following it is singular. It also takes a singular verb when used to mean "not one," even if the object of the following prepositional phrase is plural. However, *none* may take a plural verb when it is used to mean "not any" and the object of the following prepositional phrase is plural. Thus, when you use *none* in such constructions you must be sure of your meaning.

- None of the players _____ (was, were) able to pass the physical fitness test.
- The dean was displeased to learn that none of the foreign students _____ (is, are) majoring in education or sociology.

Collective nouns: Sometimes called group nouns, collective nouns are singular in form but denote a group of some sort. Examples include committee, class, crew, family, staff, troop, jury,

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team, squad, and union. A collective noun takes a singular verb when the group is regarded as a unit functioning as one. However, a collective noun takes a plural verb when individual members of the group are regarded as functioning separately.

- The family _____ (has, have) been arriving two or three at a time since last weekend.
- For the third time this year, the committee _____ (is, are) going to consider increasing the dues.

Inverted sentences: Sometimes sentences are structured in such a way (inverted) that the verb precedes the subject. Such sentences may begin with a modifying phrase or such words as *here*, *there*, *how*, *what*, and *where*. When you write such sentences, take care to match the verb with the subject that follows.

- Here _____ (comes, come) the coaches and the players for both teams.
- Beside the old gymnasium _____ (stands, stand) an elm, several maples, and a huge Indian.

Relative pronouns: When the relative pronouns *who*, *which*, or *that* are used as subjects of dependent adjective clauses, the verb of the adjective clause must agree in number with the antecedent of the pronoun. If the antecedent is singular, the verb of the adjective clause must be singular; if the antecedent is plural, the verb of the adjective clause must be plural.

- Each fraternity has its own elected officers, who _____ (conducts, conduct) the business of the organization.
- This reference book concludes with pages that _____ (contains, contain) lists of American colleges and universities.

Subjects with predicate nouns: When the subject and a predicate noun in the sentence differ in number, the verb--always a linking verb--should agree with the subject, not with the predicate noun.

- To Clinton's way of thinking, fancy dinners _____ (is, are) not a luxury.
- My favorite brunch _____ (is, are) sausage, eggs, chips, and a green salad.

Verbal nouns and noun clauses: Verbal nouns--i.e., gerunds and gerund phrases, infinitives and infinitive phrases--and noun clauses used as subjects always take a singular verb.

- Swimming across the English Channel _____ (is, are) still a major accomplishment.
- Whether we were great leaders or ordinary citizens really _____ (makes, make) little difference later on.

Titles of works, names of businesses, and words and words: The title of a literary work, even if plural in form, always takes a singular verb. Similarly, the name of a business enterprise and words referred to as words take a singular verb.

- Frames Unlimited _____ (does, do) most of the work for the gallery.
- Concerti _____ (is, are) the plural form of concerto.

Plural forms with singular meanings: Some nouns are plural in form but singular in meaning, and thus take a singular verb. Examples include *aerobics*, *economics*, *headquarters*, *hives*, *mathematics*, *means*, *measles*, *mumps*, *news*, *physics*, *stamina*, *summons*, and *whereabouts*.

- Economics _____ (has, have) never been exactly my cup of tea.
- The whereabouts of the thieves _____ (is, are) not known at this time.

Noun phrases: Subjects composed of noun phrases that indicate such things as a measured distance, a period of time, a specific quantity, or a sum of money, when considered as a single unit, take singular verbs.

- Fifty miles _____ (is, are) a long way to walk, much less run.
- Precisely thirty years _____ (was, were) his tenure of office.

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