

## Subject-Verb Agreement

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What is subject-verb agreement?

In short, if your subject is singular, your verb must be singular; if your subject is plural, your verb must be plural. The difficulty comes with identifying whether a given noun is singular or plural.

### Compound Subjects

When two nouns are connected by “and”, consider the subject plural.

The little **boy** *plays* outside.

The little **boy and girl** *play* outside.

The subject is plural because both of the nouns are performing the action.

### Or and Nor

When two nouns are connected by “or” or “nor”, the subject closest to the verb determines the number of the verb.

My **mom or dad** *picks* me up from school.

My **mom or cousins** *pick* me up from school.

My **cousins or mom** *picks* me up from school.

\*\*Tip: Which one of the examples above sounds awkward to you? Probably the last one because even though there is an “or” between the subjects, there are still TWO subjects so it *seems* to our ears like the verb should be plural. Since this is the case, it’s usually a good idea to put the plural subject closest to the verb. Either way would be technically correct, but the latter *sounds* better and will be more appealing to your reader.

### The Noun Phrase

To add details to a sentence, we often add a descriptive phrase after the subject. The subject together with this phrase is called the noun phrase. The subject is always the noun at the beginning of the noun phrase; don’t get confused by the words that come between the subject and the verb.

Simple sentence: **The dog** *chases* the cat.

With noun phrase: **The dog with his hair tied in ribbons** *chases* the cat.

In this case, focus on which subject actually performs the action. “Dog” “hair” and “ribbons” are all nouns, but the dog is the one that is chasing.

### Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns are words such as “everybody” “each” “someone” “nobody” “either”, etc. These pronouns refer to one or more unspecified objects or beings. Though they can sound plural, these words are always singular subjects.

**Everyone** plans to buy an ice cream cone.

**Each** flavor of ice cream tastes homemade.

**Every** flavor of ice cream tastes homemade.

**Nobody** wants to try the popcorn flavor except George.

### Collective Nouns

A collective noun describes a group of objects or beings. Words such as “team” “crowd” “family” “flock” etc. sound singular but are plural because they refer to groups.

The **family** walks to the park down the street.

The **team** hopes to go to the championship this year.

The **flock** flies south at this time every year.

The exception to this rule is when the verb describes an action that must be taken by the individuals in the group rather than the group itself.

The **committee** were unable to agree on work plan.

### There and Here

These two words are never subjects. Sentences that begin with “there” or “here” usually have the subject follow the verb.

There are two good **reasons** to stay home tonight.

Here stands the haunted **mansion**.

### Subjects that end in “s”

Some nouns naturally end in “s” but are not plural: measles, physics, civics, molasses, etc. These words look like plurals, but they are not.

**Physics** takes up so much of my time!

**Measles** is not as common as it used to be.

### Words as Words and Gerunds

All titles, words as words, and gerunds are treated as singular subjects.

*A Tale of Two Cities* tells the story of the French Revolution, before and after.

“It’s raining cats and dogs” means it’s raining very hard.

Buying flowers shows you care.

## Practice

These exercises are meant to help you gauge your understanding of subject-verb agreement. If you get confused, just ask one of the WRC staff for help.

1. Fill in the blank with an appropriate tense of the given verb:  
The ocean (cover) \_\_\_\_\_ three fourths of the Earth's surface.  
Its plants and animals (provide) \_\_\_\_\_ us with food. Both the deeper regions and the shallow water (support) \_\_\_\_\_ life.  
Each ocean animal (live) \_\_\_\_\_ in a specific part of the water.  
A beach or reef (make) \_\_\_\_\_ a good home for small, colorful fish and crustaceans. A pod of whales (prefer) \_\_\_\_\_ the deeper water that is farther from shore. Fish with scary faces or no eyes (live) \_\_\_\_\_ in the deepest parts of the ocean. There (be) \_\_\_\_\_ no light in those areas because the sun cannot penetrate that far below the surface. Studying these fish (require) \_\_\_\_\_ scientists to send cameras many kilometers underwater. Nobody (want) \_\_\_\_\_ to come face-to-face with these ugly fish in the dark.
2. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. Penguins and seals occupies the South Pole.
  - b. Penguins and seals occupy the South Pole.
3. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. Either one polar bear or many seals win in a fight.
  - b. Either one polar bear or many seals wins in a fight.
4. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. Everyone wants to see penguins at the zoo.
  - b. Everyone want to see penguins at the zoo.
5. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. The polar bear's long paws allow him to swim deep under water.
  - b. The polar bear's long paw allow him to swim deep under water.
6. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. The ice that humans find so slippery provide the perfect surface for penguins to slide on.
  - b. The ice that humans find so slippery provides the perfect surface for penguins to slide on.
7. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. Physics enable scientists to understand how fast penguins can slide and swim.
  - b. Physics enables scientists to understand how fast penguins can slide and swim.

8. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. There is many documentaries about life in the arctic and the Antarctic.
  - b. There are many documentaries about life in the arctic and the Antarctic.
  
9. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. Here is a book about orcas and how they hunt.
  - b. Here are a book about orcas and how they hunt.
  
10. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. *Swimming through the Depths* explain how seals play with each other underwater.
  - b. *Swimming through the Depths* explains how seals play with each other underwater.
  
11. Circle the sentence with the correct subject-verb agreement.
  - a. Reading about these regions and animals show us a world different from our own.
  - b. Reading about these regions and animals shows us a world different from our own.