

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must agree in both number and person. Number shows whether the subject is singular or plural. A singular subject must take a singular verb, and a plural subject must take a plural verb. Person shows the identity of the subject of the sentence: the person speaking (first person), the person who is spoken to (second person), and the person who is being spoken about (third person).

Note: In the examples throughout this handout all the subjects are **boldfaced**, and all the verbs are *italicized*.

Person	Singular	Plural
First person	I	we
Second person	you	you
Third person	he, she, it	they

Agreement: first and second person

Subjects and verbs in the first and second person agree in the same way. When using the subjects **I**, **we**, and **you** the verb does not include an “s” at the end.

- **I** *scream*, **you** *scream*, **we** *all scream* for ice cream

This is a good memory device because the sentence includes both first person (I, we) and second person (you) subjects, and every time “scream” is used there is no “s.”

Agreement: third person

The remainder of this handout will address subject-verb agreement for third-person.

When writing in the third person, verbs carry an “s” if the subject is singular; omit the “s” if the subject is plural.

Think of third-person agreement as a “trade-off” of “s” endings between the subject and the verb. If the subject ends in “s,” then the verb will not. If the verb ends in “s,” then the subject will not. The “trade-off” rule still applies to irregular plural nouns and pronouns that do not end with an “s” (children, salmon, they, these...). Verbs associated with these plural subjects should not end with an “s.”

- **Salmon** *migrate* upstream every fall. **They** *return* to the streams where they were hatched.

Verbs that are paired with auxiliary (helping) verbs **do not** follow the “trade-off” rule. The verb does not get an “s” ending even if the subject is singular.

- A **salmon** *will remember* the location of its home stream.
- **It** *should spawn* in the same stream.

Subjects and verbs must still agree, even if there is a clause separating them.

- **Beverly**, who is in the first year of her undergraduate degree, *studies* very hard.

- My **friends** in the next town *love* salmon for dinner.

In this case, ignore the clause separating the subject and the verb, and focus on making the subject and the verb agree.

Compound Subjects

In most cases, compound subjects that are joined with “and” are treated as plural subjects. The exception to this rule is when both items in a compound subject refer to the same person, place or thing.

- No matter what subject she teaches, this **expert and researcher** *cares* greatly for her students.

Here, both “expert” and “researcher” describe one person.

Another exception to the rule of treating compound subjects as plural is when “or” or “nor” comes between the parts of a compound subject. In this case, the verb agrees with the part of the subject that is closest.

- Neither **Sarah** nor **James** *eats* broccoli.

Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns are words that do not rename any particular person, place or thing. They take a singular or a plural verb form depending on the word and the context. The table below briefly shows which indefinite pronouns take singular or plural forms.

Indefinite pronoun	Verb form
another, any, anybody, anyone, anything, each, each one, either, every, everyone, everything, more, much, neither, nobody, none, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something	Singular
both, ones, others	Plural
all, any, more, many, enough, none, some, few, and most	Use singular or plural verb form, depending on context

To determine when the indefinite pronouns in the bottom of the table use a singular or a plural verb form, pay attention to the noun that they refer to. You can also try substituting the pronoun with *he*, *she*, *it* or *they*. For example:

- Millions of Canadians are called for jury duty each year, but **most** never actually *serve* on a jury.

In the sentence above, “most” refers to “Canadians,” so “most” acts like a plural subject. The sentence would still be grammatically correct if you used “they” instead of “most,” but some of the sentence’s meaning would be lost. “Most” tells us that many, but not all, of the Canadians never serve on a jury.

In the sentence below, “most” refers to “trial testimony,” so “most” acts like a singular subject. You could also substitute “it” for “most.” That is why the verb “remain” ends with an “s.”

- Some trial testimony can be highly dramatic, but **most** *remains* fairly tedious.

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns are nouns that refer to single units made up of multiple parts, such as groups of people. Some collective nouns include: family, audience, crowd, group, team, band, staff, and faculty. Collective nouns agree with their verbs in either a singular or a plural sense, depending on whether the sentence refers to the actions of the single unit or the actions of the people who make up that unit.

- My favorite football **team** *wins* very often.
- The **team** *have* similar ideas about the best scoring tactics.

If you think the second example sounds awkward, it is acceptable to add a plural noun such as “members” to make the sentence clearer.

- The team **members** *have* similar ideas about the best scoring tactics.

Nouns that sound plural but are singular

Some nouns sound plural, but they are actually singular; for example: economics, athletics, politics, mathematics, physics, or news.

- **News** of snow flurries *makes* me stay inside and play video games.

However, there are some singular nouns that sound plural, and also take a plural verb. These are words such as trousers, pants, or scissors.

- My **pants** *have* a hole in the knee!

Reference

Rosen, Leonard J. and Laurence Behrens. *The Allyn and Bacon Handbook*. 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2003. Print.