

## Agreement between subject and verb (1)

A

If a sentence has a singular subject it is followed by a singular verb, and if it has a plural subject it is followed by a plural verb; that is, the verb *agrees with* the subject. Compare:

- She lives* in China. *and*  *More people live* in Asia than in any other continent.

When the subject of the sentence is complex the following verb must agree with the main noun in the subject. In the examples below the subject is underlined and the main noun is circled.

Notice how the verb, in italics, agrees with the main noun:

- Many leading members* of the opposition party *have* criticised the delay.  
 *The only excuse* that he gave for his actions *was* that he was tired.

The verb must agree with the subject when the subject follows the verb (see Units 99 & 100):

- Among the people invited *was* the mayor. (*compare* The mayor *was* among...)  
 Displayed on the board *were* the exam results. (*compare* The exam results *were* displayed...)

B

If the subject is a clause, we usually use a singular verb:

- To keep these young people in prison* *is* inhuman.  
 *Having overall responsibility for the course* *means* that I have a lot of meetings.  
 *Whoever took them* *remains* a mystery.  
 *That Rangers won both matches* *was* a great achievement.

However, if we use a *what*-clause as subject (see Unit 98B), we use a singular verb if the following main noun is singular, and either a singular or a plural verb if the following main noun is plural (although a plural verb is preferred in more formal contexts):

- What worries us* *is* the poor selection process.  
 *What is needed* *are* additional resources. (*or more colloquially ...needed is...*)

C

Some nouns with a singular form, referring to groups of some kind, can be used with either a singular or plural form of the verb:

- The council* *has* (or *have*) postponed a decision on the new road.

We use a singular verb if the focus is on the institution or organisation as a whole unit, and a plural verb if the focus is on a collection of individuals. Often you can use either with very little difference in meaning, although in formal contexts (such as academic writing) it is more common to use a singular verb. Other words like this, sometimes called *collective nouns*, include *army, association, audience, class, club, college, committee, community, company, crew, crowd, department, electorate, enemy, family, generation, government, group, jury, opposition, orchestra, population, press, public, school, team, university*, and the names of specific organisations such as *the Bank of England, the BBC, IBM, Sony, the United Nations*.

In some contexts a plural form of the verb is needed. We would say:

- The committee usually *raise* their hands to vote 'Yes'. (*not* The committee usually *raises* its hands...)

as this is something that the individuals do, not the committee as a whole. In others, a singular form is preferred. We would say:

- The school *is* to close next year. (*not* The school *are* to close...)

as we are talking about something which happens to the school as a building or institution, not to the individuals in the school.

D

When names and titles ending in *-s* refer to a single unit we use a singular verb. Examples include countries; newspapers; titles of books, films, etc.; and quoted plural words or phrases:

- At this time of the year *the Netherlands* *is* one hour ahead of the UK.  
 *The Los Angeles Times* *lists* Derek Jones as the fifth richest man in the world.  
 *The Machine Gunners* *was* one of Robert Westall's most successful books.  
 '*Daps*' *is* the word used in the south west of the country for sports shoes.

- 40.1 Complete the sentences with a singular or plural form of the verb in brackets. Use present tense forms. (A & B)
- 1 Keeping large animals as pets in a small house ..... cruel. (*be*)
  - 2 An investigation of the circumstances surrounding her death ..... that she was murdered. (*suggest*)
  - 3 What amazes me ..... his ability to hit the ball so hard. (*be*)
  - 4 The main reasons for his lack of progress ..... to be his poor motivation and inability to concentrate. (*appear*)
  - 5 The cost of housing in the southern parts of the country ..... risen dramatically in the last year. (*have*)
  - 6 That he was the best of the many talented golfers of his generation ..... indisputable. (*seem*)
  - 7 The village's first new houses for 20 years ..... to be built next to Grove Farm. (*be*)
  - 8 Among the many valuable paintings in the gallery ..... a self-portrait by Picasso. (*be*)
  - 9 What I particularly enjoy about the film ..... the scenes in Australia. (*be*)
- 40.2 Complete the sentences with one of the following nouns and an appropriate form of the verb in brackets. If a singular and plural verb form are possible, give both. (C)
- |          |                 |                    |            |           |
|----------|-----------------|--------------------|------------|-----------|
| audience | class           | crew               | jury       | orchestra |
| press    | <del>team</del> | the United Nations | university |           |
- 1 The team ..... play/plays ..... its first match of the season at its home ground. (*play*)
  - 2 If the ..... to host the conference, I just don't know where we will be able to hold it. (*refuse*)
  - 3 The world-wide television ..... for tomorrow's cup final ..... expected to be 200 million. (*be*)
  - 4 The ..... classical concerts throughout the year. (*perform*)
  - 5 The Waterman's Junior Book Prize ..... three adults and three children. (*include*)
  - 6 The ..... all passed the end-of-year exam. (*have*)
  - 7 The ..... a picture of chaos in our schools, but it's just not like that at all. (*present*)
  - 8 ..... ordered an investigation of the capture of members of its peace-keeping force in eastern Africa. (*have*)
- 40.3 Correct any mistakes in these sentences or write ✓ if they are already correct. (A–D)
- 1 The United States come top of the list of countries ranked by economic performance.
  - 2 The people I know who have seen the film say that it's really good.
  - 3 A report in the *Sunday Times* detail the crimes of a 14-year-old boy in Southcastle.
  - 4 *Northern Lights* are one of Suzanne's favourite books.
  - 5 The stairs leading to the first floor were steep and poorly lit.
  - 6 Chequers is the country house of the British Prime Minister.
  - 7 Whoever made all the mess in the kitchen have to clear it up.
  - 8 The phrase 'men in white coats' are used to talk about psychiatrists.
  - 9 The public needs to be kept informed about progress in the peace talks.
  - 10 Musical chairs are a party game where everyone dashes for a seat when the music stops.

# Agreement between subject and verb (2)

A

With **any of, each of, either of, neither of, or none of** and a **plural noun/pronoun** we can use a *singular* or *plural* verb. However, we are more likely to use a singular verb in careful written English.

- I don't think **any of them** *knows* (or *know*) where the money is hidden.
- Neither of the French athletes** *has* (or *have*) won this year.

With **a/the majority of, a number of, a lot of, plenty of, all (of), or some (of)** and a **plural noun/pronoun** we use a *plural* verb. But if we say **the number of**, we use a *singular* verb.

- A number of** refugees *have* been turned back at the border.
- The number of** books in the library *has* risen to over five million.

After **one of** and a **plural noun/pronoun** we use a *singular* verb. However, after **one of + plural noun/pronoun + who** we can often use either a singular or plural verb, although a plural verb is more grammatical.

- One of the reasons** I took the job *was* that I could work from home.
- He's **one of those teachers who** *insist/insists* on pupils sitting silently in class.

With **any of, none of, the majority of, a lot of, plenty of, all (of), some (of)** and an **uncountable noun** we use a *singular* verb.

- All the furniture** *was* destroyed in the fire.
- None of the equipment** *appears* to be damaged.

With **every** or **each** and a **singular noun** or **co-ordinated noun (x and y)** we use a *singular* verb. (For **each of**, see above.)

- Every room** *looks* over the harbour.
- Every boy and girl** *takes* part in the activity.
- Each child** *has* drawn a picture. *but*
- The children** *have each* drawn a picture.

With **everyone, everybody, everything** (and similar words beginning **any-, some-** and **no-**) we use a *singular* verb.

- Practically **everyone** *thinks* that Phil should be given the job.

B

When a subject has two or more items joined by **and**, we usually use a plural verb:

- Jean and David** *are* moving back to Australia.

However, phrases connected by **and** can also be followed by singular verbs if we think of them as making up a single item:

- Meat pie and peas** *is* Tom's favourite at the moment. (or *...are...*)
- The lorry, its cargo and passengers** *weighs* around 35 tonnes. (or *...weigh...*)

C

When a subject is made up of two or more items joined by **(either)...or...** or **(neither)...nor...** we use a singular verb if the last item is singular (although a plural verb is sometimes used in informal English), and a plural verb if the last item is plural:

- Either the station or the cinema** *is* a good place to meet. (or *...are...* in informal English)
- The President or his representatives** *are* to attend the meeting.

If the last item is singular and previous item plural, we can use a singular or plural verb:

- Either the teachers or the principal** *is* to blame for the accident. (or *...are* to blame...)

D

In **there + be/have** (see Unit 95) we use a singular verb form with singular and uncountable nouns and a plural form with plural nouns. However, in informal speech we often use a shortened singular form of **be** or **have** (= **There's**) with plural nouns:

- Over the last few years **there** *have* been many **improvements** in car safety.
- There's** been lots of good films on lately. (or **There've** been...)

We often do the same with **how/here/where + be/have**:

- How's** your mum and dad these days? (or **How are...**?)

41.1 For each set of sentences, choose an appropriate noun or phrase from (i) and a verb from (ii). Use the present simple for the verb, active or passive as appropriate. If both singular and plural verb forms are possible, give them both. (A)

- (i) 

his early paintings	<del>my children</del>
Dr Jones's acquaintances	the food

 (ii) 

know	remain	<del>remember</del>	taste
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- 1 a I'd be surprised if any of my children remember/ remembers my birthday.  
 b It's unlikely that any of ..... . It seems that he destroyed most of the work he produced during the 1930s.  
 c I don't think any of ..... particularly good. In fact, the restaurant is rather disappointing.  
 d An investigation is underway to discover whether any of ..... where he is.

- (i) 

other museums	vegetarians
victims	medicines

 (ii) 

charge	exceed	expect	relieve
--------	--------	--------	---------

- 2 a Mainly because of the recent health scares involving beef and chicken, the number of ..... to rise dramatically in the next five years.  
 b You can still go into the National Museum for free, although a number of ..... in the capital ..... people for entry.  
 c A number of ..... the symptoms of influenza, but none can cure it.  
 d It is estimated that the number of ..... of the flooding ..... a hundred thousand, and further deaths are anticipated.

- (i) 

player	the cars	the pieces
these factors		

 (ii) 

influence	last	test	try
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- 3 a The whole concert includes 20 short items from young musicians. Each of ..... about 5 minutes.  
 b There are four major influences on exchange rates: price levels, tariffs, preference for imported goods, and productivity. Here we investigate how each of ..... the exchange rate.  
 c The aim of the game is quite simple. Each ..... to buy as many properties on the board as possible.  
 d Each of ..... for safety, fuel economy and reliability.

41.2 Complete the sentences with present simple forms of the verb in brackets. If both a singular and plural form are possible, give them both. (A-D)

- 1 Plenty of European football clubs ..... interested in signing Nilsen from Rowham City, but the Rowham manager has said that no-one at the club ..... Nilsen to leave. (*bel want*)  
 2 The majority of those questioned ..... that the government's economic policies have failed, although neither the Prime Minister nor the Education Minister ..... indicated that these policies will change. (*think/ has*)  
 3 "It's the first time that either of us ..... been to China, but everyone we've met here ..... been very welcoming and helpful." (*havel have*)  
 4 Professor Smith and Dr Peters ..... that the wreck of the ship and its cargo ..... a danger to local people fishing near the island. (*claim/ constitute*)  
 5 "Oh, good, sausages and chips ..... my favourite." "Sorry, all the sausages ..... gone, but there ..... plenty of chips left if you want some." (*bel has/ be*)

# Agreement between subject and verb (3)

**A** Some nouns are usually plural and take a plural verb. These include **belongings, clothes, congratulations, earnings, goods, outskirts, overheads, particulars** (= information), **premises** (= building), **riches, savings, stairs, surroundings, thanks**. The noun **whereabouts** can be used with either a singular or a plural verb. The nouns **police** and **people** always take a plural verb, and the noun **staff** usually does:

- The company's **earnings** *have increased* for the last five years.
- Police** *believe* that Thomas is in Brazil, although his exact **whereabouts** *are/is* unknown.
- Staff** *say* that the new computer system has led to greater levels of stress in their work.

**B** Some nouns always end in -s and look as if they are plural, but when we use them as the subject they have a singular verb:

- The **news** from the Middle East *seems* very encouraging.

Other words like this include **means** (= 'method' or 'money'); some academic disciplines, e.g. **economics, linguistics, mathematics, phonetics, physics, politics, statistics**; some sports, e.g. **athletics, gymnastics**; and some diseases, e.g. **diabetes, measles, rabies**. However, compare:

<i>academic subject</i>	<i>general use</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Politics</b> <i>is</i> popular at this university.	<input type="checkbox"/> Her <b>politics</b> <i>are</i> bordering on the fascist. (= political belief)
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Statistics</b> <i>was</i> always my worst subject.	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Statistics</b> <i>are</i> able to prove anything you want them to. (= numerical information)
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Economics</b> <i>has</i> only recently been recognised as a scientific study.	<input type="checkbox"/> The <b>economics</b> behind their policies <i>are</i> unreasonable. (= the financial system)

**C** Although the words **data** and **media** (= newspaper, television, etc.) are plural (with singular forms **datum** and **medium**), they are commonly used with a singular verb. However, in formal contexts such as academic writing a plural verb is preferred. Notice that other similar plurals such as **criteria** and **phenomena** (with singular forms **criterion** and **phenomenon**) are always used with plural verbs. Compare:

- All the **data** *is* available for public inspection. (*or ...are available...*) *and*
- I agree that the **criteria** *are* not of equal importance. (*not ...the criteria is not...*)

**D** With a phrase referring to a measurement, amount or quantity we usually prefer a singular verb:

- Only **three metres** *separates* the runners in first and second places. (*rather than ...separate...*)
- The **fifty pounds** he gave me *was* soon spent. (*rather than ...were...*)

and a singular verb must be used when the complement is a singular noun phrase (e.g. a long time):

- Three hours** *seems* a long time to take on the homework. (*not Three hours seem...*)

After **per cent** (also **percent** or **%**) (**of**) we use a singular verb if the **per cent** phrase refers to a singular or uncountable noun and a plural verb if it refers to a plural noun. Compare:

- An inflation rate** of only 2 per cent *makes* a big difference to exports. *and*
- I would say that about 50 per cent **of the houses** *need* major repairs.

However, where we use a singular noun that can be thought of as either a whole unit or a collection of individuals, we can use either a singular or plural verb:

- Some 80 per cent **of the electorate** *is* expected to vote. (*or ...are expected...*)

## 42.1 Make any necessary corrections to the underlined verbs. (A-D)

- 1 Dr Jones's whereabouts has been kept a closely guarded secret by his family.
- 2 Bill Clinton's politics was inspired by John Kennedy.
- 3 Phenomena such as sun spots have puzzled scientists for centuries.
- 4 Some 30 per cent of the milk drunk in the country are imported.
- 5 When the soldiers got lost in the jungle, their only means of survival were to eat berries.
- 6 Over the last decade the company's overheads has increased dramatically.
- 7 The research data was collected during the period 12<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> July 2002.
- 8 You don't need much sugar for this pudding; ten grams are enough.
- 9 Modern linguistics is often said to have begun at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- 10 Congratulations goes to Richard Branch for his excellent exam results.
- 11 The coastal surroundings of the village is particularly attractive.
- 12 Nowadays politics seem to be more about saving money than changing society for the better.
- 13 He feels that the media have criticised him unfairly.
- 14 I know people often have to wait for hospital treatment, but two years seems ridiculously long.
- 15 Measles have killed a large number of children in the Nagola region.
- 16 Further particulars about the house are available from the owner.
- 17 Around 90 per cent of the concert audience was over 60 years old.
- 18 Ten kilometers are a long way to run if you're not fit.
- 19 If athletics are neglected in schools, this will have a big impact on future national teams.
- 20 People says the house is haunted.
- 21 Recent statistics provide firm evidence of a rapid increase in living standards in Asia.
- 22 About 60 per cent of the people questioned wants cars to be banned from the town centre.

## 42.2 Complete these extracts from newspaper articles with a singular or plural form of the verbs in brackets. If both singular and plural forms are possible, give them both. (A-D; also Unit 40)

- 1 The outskirts of our cities ..... (*have*) benefited from the new out-of-town shopping centres that ..... (*have*) recently been built.
- 2 On average, 25 litres of water ..... (*be*) used each day by each household and it is anticipated that as the population ..... (*expect*) higher living standards, this figure will rise.
- 3 It has been found that some 30 per cent of the office space in London ..... (*be*) presently empty and the Department of Employment ..... (*blame*) high property prices.
- 4 Three centimetres ..... (*be*) all that separated the first two runners in last night's 10,000 metres and the sports club ..... (*have*) declared the race a dead-heat.
- 5 The research group now ..... (*admit*) that the criteria they used in the work ..... (*be*) not totally reliable.
- 6 Following last week's major art theft from the Arcon Art Gallery, the premises ..... (*be*) searched by police last night and the owner's belongings ..... (*have*) been taken away for further inspection.
- 7 A survey of the opinions of British students ..... (*show*) that economics ..... (*be*) the least popular subject studied at university. However, 90 per cent of all those economics students surveyed ..... (*believe*) that their courses are well taught.
- 8 Sufferers from diabetes ..... (*have*) welcomed the launch by Federex of a new drug to combat the disease. The company ..... (*say*) that earnings from the drug ..... (*be*) to be put back into further research.