

Subject and Verb Agreement

Subjects must agree with their verbs in both person and number.

Confusing Case #1: Using “or” or “nor”

When using “or” or “nor” in a compound subject containing a singular and plural subject, the verb agrees with the closest subject.

1. My mom or dad pays / pay the bill.
2. Neither the plates nor the serving bowl goes / go on the shelf.
3. Neither she nor I is / am / are getting the lunch special.
4. The president or the vice president is / are speaking today.

Confusing Case #2: Subject and verb are interrupted by a phrase/clause

The verb should agree with the subject of the sentence, regardless of the interrupting phrase/clause.

1. The highest percentage of voters is / are in favor.
2. All of the mechanics, except the one smirking, is / are honest.
3. The team captain, as well as his players, was / were anxious.
4. Excitement (as well as nervousness) is / are the cause of her shaking.

Confusing Case #3: Collective nouns can be singular or plural

If the collective noun refers to the group as a unit (which is usually the case), then it takes a singular verb. Some collective nouns that are often considered singular are: *audience, club, committee, company, class, crew, crowd, family, flock, group, jury, organization, pack, pair, population, set, swarm, team*. If the collective noun refers to the individuals/parts in the group, then the verb should be plural. Some collective nouns that are often considered plural are: *couple, majority, staff*.

1. The group of pirates was / were infected with scurvy.
2. The organization of taxi drivers protests / protest each year to raise fares.
3. The majority of courts has / have upheld the ruling.
4. The staff works / work hard to meet their goals.

Confusing Case #4: Words that appear to be plural but are actually singular

Words that appear to be plural but are actually singular include: *anybody, anyone, anything, everybody, everyone, everything, nobody, no one, nothing, somebody, someone, something, each, either, neither, other, one*. Others are: *athletics, bouquet, civics, dollars, economics, mathematics, measles, mumps, news, physics*. Also *distances, periods of time, and sums of money* are considered singular units.

1. Every one of the shirts has / have a green collar.
2. Each of the dancers twirls / twirl beautifully.
3. Either of the answers is / are correct.
4. One of the boxes was / were already opened.
5. That bouquet of flowers smells / smell lovely.
6. Three miles is / are too far to walk.

Confusing Case #5: Words that appear to be singular but are actually plural

Conversely, words that are actually plural include: *both, few, many, number, several*. Others include: *scissors, glasses/spectacles, trousers/pants, pliers* (unless preceded by "pair of")

1. Few knows / know what is really takes to get ahead.
2. A number of suggestions was / were made.
3. Several indicates / indicate that they will be late.
4. My glasses is / are on the bed.

ANSWER KEY:

Confusing Case #1: Using “or” or “nor”

1. pays
2. goes
3. am
4. is

Confusing Case #2: Subject and verb are interrupted by a phrase/clause

1. is
2. are
3. was
4. is

Confusing Case #3: Collective nouns can be singular or plural

1. was
2. protests
3. have
4. work

Confusing Case #4: Words that appear to be plural but are actually singular

1. has
2. twirls
3. is
4. was
5. smells
6. is

Confusing Case #5: Words that appear to be singular but are actually plural

1. know
2. were
3. indicate
4. are