

Writing and Tutorial Center

Mastering Subject-Verb Agreement

In comparison to many other languages, verb endings in English are relatively straightforward. In some languages, every type of subject (first, second, third person, singular and plural) affects the verb ending. In English, however, the only subject that affects the ending of the auxiliary or main verb is the third person singular. It can be tricky sometimes to decide if the subject should be considered singular or plural; for example; are the subjects *everyone* or *each of the students* singular or plural?

BASICS OF SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Use an -s ending on a present simple tense verb with a third person singular (he/she/it) subject.

The woman over there *wants* to speak to you.
David *rides* the subway to work.

Auxiliary verbs in present tense also have to agree with their subject. Singular subjects take the -s form of the auxiliary (is/does/has; plural subjects take the no -s form of the auxiliary (are/do/have):

The glacier *has* almost completely melted.
Those people *do* not live there anymore.

The modal auxiliaries (will/would/shall/should/may/might/must) are always followed by the base form:

The glacier *might* melt.
The glaciers *will* not last forever.

If a sentence has more than one subject (compound subject), use the plural verb form:

My uncle and my cousin *visit* us every summer.

SINGULAR SUBJECTS

For collective nouns (nouns that refer to a group of people, e.g. team, family, class), use a singular verb:

Our class *meets* on Tuesdays.
My family originally *comes* from Cuba.

For uncountable nouns, use singular a singular verb.

The information *seems* useful.
Fake news *is* an epidemic in our society.

Quantity words (all/any/half/more/most/no/a lot of/some) have a singular verb with an uncountable noun and plural verb with a plural countable noun:

All the furniture *needs* to be repaired.
All the plans *look* in order.

With none, you can use the singular or the plural verb form:

None of the criminals *were* apprehended.
None of the criminals *was* apprehended.

For indefinite pronoun subjects (each, every, everybody, someone, no one, another) use the singular form:

Everyone *deserves* to be loved.

If the subject uses either...or or neither...nor, the verb agrees with the noun closest to it:

Either her colleagues or her assistant *has* the password.
Neither her aunt nor her cousins *have* responded to the wedding invitation.