

2 AGREEMENT

NUMBER

Number is the form of a word that indicates whether the word is singular or plural.

2a. When a word refers to one person, place, thing, or idea, it is *singular*. When a word refers to more than one, it is *plural*.

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------|-------|------|----|------|
| SINGULAR | book | woman | one | I | he |
| PLURAL | books | women | many | we | they |

Agreement of Subject and Verb

2b. A verb agrees with its subject in number.

(1) Singular subjects take singular verbs.


EXAMPLES The stranger shoots the frog.
Johnny calls himself Red Chief.

(2) Plural subjects take plural verbs.

EXAMPLES Six girls compete in the race.
Many people laugh at Charlie.

The first auxiliary (helping) verb in a verb phrase must agree with its subject.

EXAMPLES She is helping Charlie.
They are helping Charlie.

 For more about forming plurals, see pages 968–969.



Generally, nouns ending in *s* are plural (*candles, ideas, neighbors, horses*), and verbs ending in *s* are singular (*sees, writes, speaks, carries*). However, verbs used with the singular pronouns *I* and *you* generally do not end in *s*.

EXAMPLE I walk faster than you do.

Problems in Agreement

2c. The number of a subject is not changed by a prepositional phrase following the subject.

NONSTANDARD The sparse furnishings on the stage creates a somber atmosphere.

STANDARD The sparse **furnishings** on the stage **create** a somber atmosphere.

2d. The following indefinite pronouns are singular: *anybody, anyone, each, either, everybody, everyone, neither, nobody, no one, one, somebody, someone*.

EXAMPLE Each of them was sent a bouquet.

2e. The following indefinite pronouns are plural: *both, few, many, several*.

EXAMPLE Both of the stories were written by Shirley Jackson.

2f. The following indefinite pronouns may be either singular or plural: *all, any, most, none, some*.

The number of *all, any, most, none, or some* is often determined by the number of the object in a prepositional phrase following the subject. If the subject refers to a singular object, the subject is singular. If the subject refers to a plural object, the subject is plural.

EXAMPLES **All** of the **action** occurs on the top floor of a warehouse. [*All* refers to the singular object *action*.]
All of the **events** occur on the top floor of a warehouse. [*All* refers to the plural object *events*.]



Using indefinite pronouns correctly can be tricky. To help yourself, you may want to create an indefinite pronoun guide. First, summarize the information in rules 2d–2f and 2o–2r. Then, choose several examples to illustrate the rules. Create a “Help” file in which to store this information. Call up the file whenever you run into difficulty using indefinite pronouns.

2g. Subjects joined by *and* usually take a plural verb.

EXAMPLE Sam and Bill kidnap Johnny.

A compound subject that names a single person or thing takes a singular verb. A compound noun used as a subject also takes a singular verb in most cases.

EXAMPLES The **captain and quarterback** of the team was Lyle. [One person, Lyle, was both the captain and the quarterback.]
Rock and roll is my favorite kind of music. [*Rock and roll* is a compound noun naming one kind of music.]

2h. When subjects are joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb agrees with the subject nearer the verb.

EXAMPLES Neither the **director** nor the **players** were on time for rehearsal.
 Neither the **players** nor the **director** was on time for rehearsal.



QUICK CHECK I

For each of the following sentences, choose the correct form of the verb in parentheses.

- EXAMPLE** I. Both of the girls (*love, loves*) running.
 I. *love*
- My favorite story (*has, have*) always been “Raymond’s Run.”
 - Some of the story (*concern, concerns*) Squeaky’s rival.
 - Neither Gretchen nor Mary Louise really (*smile, smiles*).
 - Squeaky’s rival and schoolmate (*was, were*) Gretchen.
 - Insults and taunts directed at Raymond (*anger, angers*) his sister.



When the subject of a sentence follows all or part of the verb, the word order is *inverted*. To find the subject of a sentence with inverted order, restate the sentence in normal word order.

INVERTED Did Robert Frost write these poems?

NORMAL Robert Frost did write these poems.

INVERTED Into the clearing stepped a tiny fawn.

NORMAL A tiny fawn stepped into the clearing.



For more about contractions, see pages 962–963.

2j. Collective nouns (such as *crowd*, *family*, and *team*) may be either singular or plural.

A collective noun takes a singular verb when the noun refers to the group as a unit. A collective noun takes a plural verb when the noun refers to the individual parts or members of the group.

EXAMPLES The Frank family goes into hiding. [The family as a unit goes into hiding.]

The Frank family pack their bags. [The individual members of the family pack bags.]

2j. When the subject follows all or part of the verb, find the subject and make sure the verb agrees with it. The subject usually follows the verb in sentences beginning with *here* or *there* and in questions.

EXAMPLES There is a frog on that lily pad.
Have any other frogs jumped on?

The contractions *here's*, *there's*, and *where's* contain the verb *is* and should be used only with singular subjects.

NONSTANDARD There's the books.

STANDARD There are the books.

2k. Use the contraction *don't* with plural subjects and with the pronouns *I* and *you*. Use the contraction *doesn't* with other singular subjects.

EXAMPLES The police officers don't hear the noise.
I don't like that song.
You don't have enough money to buy that.
The frog doesn't jump.

2l. Words stating amounts are usually singular.

A word or phrase stating a weight, a measurement, or an amount of money or time is usually considered one item. Such a word or phrase takes a singular verb.

EXAMPLE Twenty-five months is the amount of time Anne kept the diary.

2m. The title of a creative work or the name of an organization or country, even when plural in form, usually takes a singular verb.

EXAMPLE "Flowers for Algernon" was made into a movie.

2n. A few nouns, though plural in form, are singular and take singular verbs.

EXAMPLE Mathematics is my best subject.

