

Subject-Verb Agreement

The fundamental principle of subject-verb agreement is that a verb agrees with its subject in number. That is, if the subject is singular, the verb is singular; if the subject is plural, the verb is plural: My brother is a nutritionist. My sisters are mathematicians.

Additional Basic Rules:

Adding *-es* or *-s* to a noun makes it plural. However, adding *-es* or *-s* to the end of a verb makes it singular.

When there are two subjects, the verb form must be plural: My brother and my sister want to stay home.

When the subject is formed with *either*, *or*, *nor*, or *neither*, the verb agrees with the noun phrase nearest to it (proximity): *Either my boss or my colleague* deserves the blame

In sentences with a singular subject and more than one verb, each verb uses the same tense: *He* picks up the toy, throws it across the room, and screams

When an adjectival (relative) clause begins with *who*, *which*, or *that* as the subject, look back in the sentence to see what it refers to (its referent). The referent will determine whether the verb in the relative clause should be in the singular or plural form.

My son loves his brothers, *who* are all older and look after him.
My son loves his brother, *who* is older and looks after him.

When we use *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, or *there were*, the form of the verb is determined by the noun of the following subject:

There are no closets near the living room.
There is no furniture in the room.

Exceptions/Complications to the Rules:

Only the pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it* take a verb ending in *-es* or *-s*

Some singular nouns may look plural in form but are always used with the singular (*he*, *she*, *it*) form of the verb: *The* news was bad yesterday

When the subject is plural, the verb must also be plural. The important thing to remember is that the subject determines whether a verb is singular or plural.

Some plural nouns might look singular but need a plural verb: *The* people in the park look happy.

The *-s* form is never used with a main verb that follows a helping verb.

He doesn't like ice cream. Not: *He* doesn't likes ice cream.