A Guide To Agreement

Subject-Verb Agreement

Every complete sentence contains two parts: a **subject** and a **predicate** (or **verb**). The subject is what (or whom) the sentence is about. The verb tells something about the subject or expresses an action.

Subjects and verbs are like married couples—they must agree with each other, or the relationship breaks down. Specifically, a verb must **agree** in person (1st, 2nd, 3rd) and number (singular or plural) with the noun or pronoun that is its subject. Most errors people make have to do with number.

1. Don't be tricked by intervening phrases that contain nouns:

    ❌ A _diet_ of acidic fruit juices and spicy foods _have_ no effect on him.
    ✅ A _diet_ of acidic fruit juices and spicy foods _has_ no effect on him.
    ❌ _Neither_ of the twins _were_ willing to volunteer.
    ✅ _Neither_ of the twins _was_ willing to volunteer.

2. There are conventions around agreement with compound subjects:

A **compound subject** is made up of two (or more) nouns and/or pronouns. The parts of a compound subject are joined by a **co-ordinating conjunction** (_and, or, nor, either … or, neither … nor, not … but, not only … but also, whether … or_).

*   When subjects are joined by **or, nor, either . . . or, neither . . . nor, not . . . but, not only . . . but also, whether . . . or**, the part of the subject nearest to the verb determines whether the verb is singular or plural:

sing. + sing.	sing. verb	_Joan or Li Fai has_ the consent form.
plural + plural	plural verb	Neither _the doctors nor the nurses are_ at the clinic today.
plural + sing.	sing.verb	The hospitals or the agency _issues_ updates. awkward
sing. + plural	plural verb	The agency or the hospitals _issue_ updates. more common

*   **And** creates a plural compound subject which takes a plural verb:

    ✅   There _are_ insulin _and_ vaccines in the refrigerator.

Again, don't let yourself be fooled by intervening phrases:

    ❌   The _height, weight and age_ of the infant _was recorded_.
    ✅   The _height, weight and age_ of the infant _were recorded_.

Another important caution: Phrases such as *as well as*, *in addition to*, *together with*, and *along with* are NOT conjunctions like *and*. They are prepositions. A singular subject followed by one of them still takes a singular verb:

❌ **The visiting nurse _as well as_ the agency _were_ unaware of the schedule.**
✅ **The visiting nurse_, as well as_ the agency_, was_ unaware of the schedule.**
✅ **Both the visiting nurse _and_ the agency _were_ unaware of the schedule.**

3. Collective nouns are a special case:

Some nouns, called **collectives**, (e.g., **series**, **set**, **staff**, **pair**, **faculty**, **orchestra**) refer either to several individuals or to a single unit. Collective nouns can be either singular or plural, depending on what you want to emphasize—the individual members of the group or the group as a whole:

✅ **The staff _were divided_ in _their_ opinions.** (every member has her or his own opinion)
✅ **The staff _was responsible_ for producing a report.** (the staff functions as a single entity to produce the report)

4. Nouns of foreign origin do not have standard English endings for singular and plural. Note that **APA Style** does not use conventional plurals for nouns ending in **—x**:

Singular	Plural	Examples
criterion	criteria	Only one *criterion was* established for subject inclusion. Six *criteria were* established for subject exclusion.
phenomenon	phenomena	The *phenomenon* of HIV/AIDS *has* changed health care. *Phenomena* of interest *include* HIV/AIDS and reducing infection rates.
datum	data	**RARE** Not one *datum supports* this conclusion. ✅The *data are* insufficient to support this conclusion. ❌ The *data is* insufficient to support this conclusion
medium	media	The gel *medium is* ready for the electrophoresis machine. The *media influence* body image among pre-teen girls.
appendix	appendices	*Appendix A contains* our interview questions. Five *appendices* of raw data *are* attached. Five *appendixes are* attached. **APA STYLE**
index	indices	This book's *index is* a source of additional topics. All *indices show* that crime rates are down this year. All *indexes show* that crime rates are down. **APA STYLE**

Noun-Pronoun Agreement

A **pronoun** (Latin *pro* = for + noun) is a word that refers to or stands in for an **antecedent** (i.e., a noun that appeared earlier).

Pronouns must agree with the noun they replace in number (singular, plural), person (1st, 2nd, 3rd) and gender (masculine, feminine, neuter). Most errors people make have to do with number.

> ✔ *The students* **want to skip the exam.** *They* **found the course useless.**

1. When two or more antecedents are joined by **and**, we use a plural pronoun:

    > ✔ **The case manager** *and* **the social worker compared** *their* **notes.**

unless this compound antecedent is preceded by **each** or **every**:

> ✔ *Each* **unit** *and* **department reports to** *its* **case manager.**

2. When two or more antecedents are mixed singular and plural, the pronoun should agree with the antecedent nearest it:

    > ✔ **Neither** *the students nor the nurse* **could hear** *herself.*

This is correct but awkward, and most native English speakers would choose this option:
> ✔ **Neither** *the nurse nor the students* **could hear** *themselves*.

3. The pronoun **none** means **no one** or **not one** and has traditionally been treated as singular:

    > ✖ *None* **of the boys lost** *their* **temper.**
    > ✔ *None* **of the boys lost** *his* **temper.**

The same convention applies to any of the "one" pronouns: **everyone, someone, anyone**.

> ✔ *Everyone has* **the same problem with that supervisor.**

4. Pronouns must be used consistently:

    > ✖ **If** *one wants* **to pass the course,** *they have* **to write the exam.**
    > ✔ **If** *they want* **to pass the course,** *they have* **to write the exam.**
    > ✔ **If** *he or she wants* **to pass the course,** *he or she has* **to write the exam.**

Tip: 'He or she' becomes very awkward if it appears often in your paper. Avoid it this way:
- change to plural: **If they want to pass the course…**
- use all masculine pronouns in one paragraph; switch to all feminine in the next
- reword without a pronoun: **To pass the course, students must write the exam.**