

Number

Number is the form a word takes to indicate whether the word is singular or plural.

5a. A word that refers to one person, place, thing, or idea is *singular* in number. A word that refers to more than one is *plural* in number.

| Singular | Plural |
|----------|------------|
| student | students |
| princess | princesses |
| child | children |
| tooth | teeth |
| it | they |
| himself | themselves |
| berry | berries |
| deer | deer |

Exercise 1 Classifying Nouns and Pronouns by Number

Identify each italicized word as either *singular* or *plural*.

EXAMPLE As a child, the girl in the [1] *photograph* was sure she was not very good at anything.

1. *singular*

She was overshadowed by the other [1] *children* in her family, especially by her older sister Madge, who wrote [2] *stories* and plays. Lonely and full of self-doubt, the girl surrounded herself with imaginary [3] *companions*. [4] *Everything* changed, though, when she caught influenza and became restless during her recovery. Her mother brought her a [5] *notebook* and suggested that, like Madge, she might write a story. After practicing on short stories, she decided to tackle a detective [6] *novel*. [7] “*They* are very difficult to do,” said Madge. “I don’t think you could write one.” Madge was wrong: The young author was Agatha Christie, who became the most successful mystery [8] *writer* in history. Her mystery novels and story collections have sold many millions of copies in [9] *English* and in at least sixty other [10] *languages*.

Link to  Literature



Agreement of Subject and Verb

5b. A verb should agree in number with its subject.

(1) Singular subjects take singular verbs.

EXAMPLES **He washes** the dishes. [The singular verb *washes* agrees with the singular subject *He*.]

A **girl** in my neighborhood **plays** in the band. [The singular subject *girl* takes the singular verb *plays*.]

(2) Plural subjects take plural verbs.

EXAMPLES **They wash** the dishes.

Several **girls** in my neighborhood **play** in the band.

In the examples above, the verbs agree in number with their subjects. Like the single-word verbs above, verb phrases also agree with their subjects. However, in a verb phrase, only the first helping (auxiliary) verb changes its form to agree with a singular or plural subject.

EXAMPLES **He has been washing** the dishes.

They have been washing the dishes.

A **girl** in my neighborhood **was playing** in the band.

Several **girls** in my neighborhood **were playing** in the band.

NOTE Generally, nouns ending in *-s* are plural (*friends, girls*), but verbs ending in *-s* are generally singular (*sees, hears*).

5c. The number of the subject usually is not determined by a word in a phrase or clause following the subject.

EXAMPLES The apartments **across the street** do not have balconies. [*Do have* agrees with *apartments*, not *street*.]

The planes **pulling up to the gate** were purchased by a movie company. [*Were purchased* agrees with *planes*, not *gate*.]

Eli, **one of my friends**, was late. [*Was* agrees with *Eli*, not *friends*.]

The movie **that I saw two weeks ago** was reviewed in today's paper. [*Was reviewed* agrees with *movie*, not *weeks*.]

Reference Note

For more about **helping verbs**, see page 65.

Reference Note

For more about **phrases**, see Chapter 3. For more about **clauses**, see Chapter 4. For examples of **subjects whose number is determined by a phrase following the subject**, see page 170.

SKILLS FOCUS

Demonstrate understanding of correct subject-verb agreement. Use verbs that agree with singular subjects. Use verbs that agree with plural subjects. Demonstrate understanding of correct subject-verb agreement.

NOTE *As well as, along with, together with, and in addition to* are compound prepositions. Words in phrases beginning with compound prepositions do not affect the number of the subject or verb.

EXAMPLE Anne, together with her cousins, **is** backpacking in Nevada.

Exercise 2 Identifying Verbs That Agree in Number with Their Subjects

For each of the following sentences, choose the verb in parentheses that agrees with the subject.

EXAMPLE 1. Did you know that people in Japan frequently (*eat, eats*) noodles?

1. *eat*

1. These pictures (*show, shows*) how noodles are prepared.
2. First, the noodle maker (*roll, rolls*) out the dough as thin as possible.
3. Then, the cook (*slice, slices*) the folded layers.
4. Next, the strands of noodles (*is, are*) separated and dusted with flour to prevent sticking.
5. After the noodles have dried a little, they (*go, goes*) into boiling water or broth to cook.
6. The Japanese (*enjoy, enjoys*) noodles made from either wheat flour, called *udon*, or buckwheat flour, called *soba*.
7. A dish of cooked noodles mixed with sauce, broth, fish, or vegetables (*makes, make*) a popular lunch.
8. Noodle shops all over Japan (*serves, serve*) a variety of noodle dishes.
9. These shops often (*resemble, resembles*) fast-food restaurants in the United States.
10. For lunch or a snack, customers at a noodle shop (*order, orders*) noodles with their favorite toppings.



Exercise 3 Identifying Subjects and Verbs That Agree in Number

Identify the subject of each verb in parentheses in the following paragraph. Then, choose the form of the verb that agrees with the subject.

EXAMPLE Units of measure sometimes [1] (*causes, cause*) confusion.

1. *Units—cause*

Confusion among shoppers [1] (*is, are*) understandable because the traditional system for indicating quantities [2] (*makes, make*) shopping a guessing game. For example, the quantity printed on yogurt containers [3] (*is, are*) the number of ounces in a container. A shopper on the lookout for bargains [4] (*does, do*) not know whether liquid or solid measure is indicated. In addition, different brands of juice [5] (*shows, show*) the same quantity in different ways. A can labeled “twenty-four ounces” [6] (*contains, contain*) the same quantity as a can labeled “one pint eight ounces.” Shoppers’ confusion over such labeling, along with rising prices, [7] (*is, are*) a matter of concern to consumer groups. These groups believe that the metric system, in use in European countries, [8] (*clears, clear*) up most of the confusion. The units in the metric system [9] (*has, have*) fixed relationships to one another. As a result, consumer groups in this country [10] (*continues, continue*) to advocate our adopting this system of measurement.

Exercise 4 Choosing Verbs with the Correct Number

Each of the following sentences contains an italicized pair of verbs in parentheses. From each pair, choose the form of the verb that agrees with its subject.

EXAMPLE 1. Of all numbers, the number 12 (*is, are*) one of the most versatile.

1. *is*

1. The even division of 12 by 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 (*is, are*) possible.
2. Curiously, the sum of these five divisors (*is, are*) a square, 16; and their product is 144, which is the square of 12 itself.
3. When the Greek philosopher Plato devised his ideal state, the system of weights and measures (*were, was*) based on the number 12 because it could be evenly divided in so many ways.
4. To this day, many quantities in our lives (*involve, involves*) the number 12.

TIPS & TRICKS

The words *one*, *thing*, and *body* are singular and so are the indefinite pronouns that contain these words.

EXAMPLES

Is [any]one late?

[Every]body was welcome.

[No]thing has been lost.

SKILLS FOCUS

Use verbs that agree with singular subjects.
Use verbs that agree with plural subjects.

5. The number of months in a year, inches in a foot, and items in a dozen (*is, are*) 12.
6. In our courts of law, 12 members of a jury (*decides, decide*) a defendant's guilt or innocence.
7. Each player in a game of checkers (*begin, begins*) with 12 pieces.
8. In bowling, 12 consecutive strikes (*give, gives*) you a perfect game.
9. The number of black pentagons on a soccer ball (*equal, equals*) the number of buttons on a push-button telephone—12.
10. Samuel Clemens even used this number as his pen name—the riverboat slang for 2 fathoms, or 12 feet, (*are, is*) *mark twain!*

5d. The following indefinite pronouns are singular: *anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, somebody, someone, and something.*

EXAMPLES

Each of the athletes **runs** effortlessly.

Neither of the women **is** ready to start.

Someone was waving a large flag.

Does everyone who signed up **enjoy** playing tennis?

5e. The following indefinite pronouns are plural: *both, few, many, and several.*

EXAMPLES

Were both of the games **postponed**?

Few that I know of **have qualified**.

Several of the runners **are exercising**.

5f. The indefinite pronouns *all, any, more, most, none, and some* may be singular or plural, depending on their meaning in a sentence.

These pronouns are singular when they refer to a singular word and plural when they refer to a plural word.

EXAMPLES

Some of the test **is** hard. [*Some refers to the singular noun test.*]

Some of the questions **are** easy. [*Some refers to the plural noun questions.*]

All of the exhibit **is** open to the public.

All of the paintings **are** on display.