Making Subjects and Verbs Agree

Resources: The OWL at Purdue website

1. If the subject is in singular form, the verb must also be singular; however, plural subjects require plural verbs. For present tense verbs, the general rule is that if the subject ends in s, the verb does not; if the verb ends in s, the subject does not.

   The woman walks one mile every day.
   The women walk one mile every day.

2. When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more nouns or pronouns that are connected by ‘and,’ use a plural verb.

   She and her friends are at the fair.
   Joggers and sprinters require supportive running shoes.

3. When two or more singular nouns or pronouns are connected by ‘or’ or ‘nor’, use a singular verb.

   The book or the pen is in the drawer.
   Neither the professor nor his assistant knows the answer.

4. When a compound subject contains both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by ‘or’ or ‘nor,’ the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is nearer the verb.

   The boy or his friends run every day.
   His friends or the boy runs every day.

5. ‘Doesn’t’ is a contraction of ‘does not’ and should be used only with a singular subject. On the other hand, ‘don’t’ is a contraction of ‘do not’ and should be used only with a plural subject.

   He doesn’t like it. They don’t like it.
The exception to this rule appears in the case of the first person and second person pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’. With these pronouns, the contraction ‘don’t’ should be used.

\[
\text{I don’t like it.} \quad \text{He doesn’t like it.} \quad \text{You don’t like it.}
\]

6. The words ‘each,’ ‘each one,’ ‘either,’ ‘neither,’ ‘everyone,’ ‘everybody,’ ‘anybody,’ ‘anyone,’ ‘nobody,’ ‘somebody,’ ‘someone,’ and ‘no one’ are singular and require a singular verb.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Each of these hot dogs} & \text{ is juicy.} & \text{Everybody} & \text{ knows Mr. Jones.} \\
\text{No one} & \text{ appreciates harsh criticism.} & \text{Someone} & \text{ likes you.} \\
\text{Neither the professor nor his assistant} & \text{ knows the answer.}
\end{align*}
\]

7. Do not be misled by a phrase that comes between the subject and the verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not with a noun or pronoun in the phrase.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{One of the boxes} & \text{ is open.} \\
\text{The team captain, as well as his players,} & \text{ is anxious.} \\
\text{The book, including all the chapters in the first section,} & \text{ is boring.} \\
\text{The woman} & \text{ with all the dogs walks down my street.}
\end{align*}
\]

8. Nouns such as ‘civics,’ ‘mathematics,’ ‘dollars,’ ‘measles,’ and ‘news’ require singular verbs.

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\begin{align*}
\text{The news} & \text{ is on at six.}
\end{align*}
\]

Note: The word dollars is a special case. When talking about an amount of money, it requires a singular verb, but when referring to the noun dollars themselves, a plural verb is required.

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\begin{align*}
\text{Five dollars} & \text{ is a lot of money.} \\
\text{Dollars} & \text{ are often used instead of rubles in Russia.}
\end{align*}
\]

9. Nouns such as ‘scissors,’ ‘tweezers,’ ‘trousers,’ and ‘shears’ require plural verbs. (There are two parts to these things.)

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\begin{align*}
\text{These scissors} & \text{ are dull.} \\
\text{Those trousers} & \text{ are made of wool.}
\end{align*}
\]

10. In sentences beginning with ‘there is’ or ‘there are’, the subject follows the verb. Since there is not the subject, the verb agrees with what follows.

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\begin{align*}
\text{There} & \text{ are many questions.} \quad \text{There} & \text{ is a question.}
\end{align*}
\]
11. Collective nouns are words that imply more than one person, but that are considered singular and take a singular verb, such as the nouns ‘group,’ ‘team,’ ‘committee,’ ‘class,’ and ‘family’.

   *The team runs* during practice.
   *The committee decides* how to proceed.
   *The family has* a long history.
   *My family has never been able to agree.*

In some cases, a sentence may call for the use of a plural verb when using a collective noun.

   *The crew are preparing* to dock the ship.

This sentence is referring to the individual efforts of each crew member.

12. Expressions such as ‘with,’ ‘together with,’ ‘including,’ ‘accompanied by,’ ‘in addition to,’ or ‘as well’ do not change the number of the subject. If the subject is singular, the verb is, too.

   *The President, accompanied by his wife, is traveling to India.*
   *All of the books, including yours, are in that box.*