Subject/Verb Agreement

This section will help you:

- understand how subjects and verbs agree in number
- recognize correct agreement between subjects and verbs
- make subjects and verbs agree in number in your own writing

In sentences, subjects and verbs agree in number.

A rainbow appears.
- refers to a single item
- accompanies a single subject

Storm clouds retreated.
- refers to more than one item
- accompanies plural subjects

Singular subjects and verbs always refer to one person or thing.

The bracket supports the shelf.
- Rosa speaks three languages.
- A pinecone hangs on the tree.

Plural subjects always refer to more than one person or thing.

The brackets support the shelf.
- Rosa’s friends speak two languages.
- Several pinecones hang on the tree.

The basic rule of agreement is that a singular subject (one person or thing) goes with a singular verb. A plural subject (more than one person or thing) goes with a plural verb. In other words, subjects and verbs must agree in number.

Place verbs that agree with the singular subjects in these sentences.

- The camel ______ water in its hump. (stores)
- One cave_______ to a waterfall. (leads)
- The candle _______ the whole room. (lights)

Place verbs that agree with the plural nouns in these sentences.

- City buses ______ late. (run)
- Brown eggs ______ the nest. (fill)
- Two gymnasts _______ to the stage. (march)

Subjects and verbs must agree in number even when they are separated by other words in the sentence.

A doctor specialized in childhood disease visits the hospital every day.

When your ear for English fails to tell you which verb form to choose, use your eyes. Trace down the subject, decide whether it is singular or plural, and then choose a verb that agrees in number.

Two singular subjects joined by and agree with a plural form.
A pool and a spa delight the guests.
But, if two singular subjects joined by and are preceded by each or every, the subject agrees with a singular verb.

Each beach and tidepool awaits you.

*Singular subjects joined by or, either . . . or, neither . . . nor agree with a similar verb.*

A sled or toboggan is useful in Utah.

Either green or blue matches the paint.

Neither glue nor tape holds the water.

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All of the verbs used so far have been single words; *is, are, write, went, ran, bought*. These verb forms are in the simple present or simple past tense. However, the verbs we use in our everyday speech and writing are often expanded verb forms that include auxiliaries. For example:

*The Olympic athletes have been under a great deal of stress.*
*The baby has been sleeping on the bed.*
*The teacher has given too much homework.*
*The boy might have discovered the lost money.*

Expanding the verb in this fashion can produce numerous one, two, or three word verb strings. For example, the verb *eat* can have many verb strings: *eat, eats, was eating, ate, an eating, will eat, have eaten, might have eaten, should eat, have been eating, may be eating, should have been eating, might have eaten, may have been eaten, could have been eaten.* When verb strings like these are used, the subjects and verbs must still agree in number.

*The Olympic athlete has been under a great deal of stress.*
*The babies have been sleeping on the bed.*
*The teachers have given too much homework.*
*The boys may have discovered the lost money.*