

Subject - Verb Agreement

There is and There are

When you use *there is* and *there are*, '*there*' is never the subject. The subject is the word that comes after the verb.

Therefore, you need to look at that word to decide if the verb is singular or plural.

*There **are** several reasons* why we must tackle the problem of global warming.

*There **is** one main reason* we must tackle global warming.

What sometimes confuses people is when there are several nouns after the verb. It is common to make the mistake of using a plural verb. In fact, the verb should agree with only the first noun.

Take a look at this simple example:

*There **is** a pen*, some pencils, and a rubber on the table.

*There **are** pens*, one pencil and some rubbers on the table.

In each of these examples, you just need to look at the first noun to decide if the subject is singular or plural - you can ignore the ones after this.

Separated Subjects

Another common mistake is when the **subject is separated** from the verb by a prepositional phrase, relative clause, or reduced relative clause.

A mistake is to make the verb agree with the last noun in the phrase or clause rather than the subject of the sentence:

Incorrect: *Improving the situation of people in **cities are*** very important.

Correct: ***Improving the situation** (of people in cities) **is*** very important.

It should not agree with '*cities*' as this is part of the prepositional phrase.

Here are some more examples of correct subject verb agreement (the phrase or clause that should be ignored for purposes of agreement is in brackets):

Obesity (in children) **is** a growing concern.

The decision (made by the country's leaders after numerous meetings) **was** definitely the right one.

The new **roads** (which the government has built) **have not reduced** congestion.

Expressions of Quantity

Another difficult area with subject verb agreement is dealing with **quantities**.

When a quantity word is followed by a prepositional phrase, it can follow the rules above i.e. the verb agrees with the subject (the quantity):

One of the new teachers **is** from India.

None of the candidates **is** likely to get my vote. (in spoken English the plural form is commonly used - 'are likely')

Five of my friends **are** coming with me on holiday.

However, for some quantity phrases you do need to refer to the noun in the prepositional phrase to decide if the verb is singular or plural:

	Singular	Plural
A lot of...	A lot of the <u>meat</u> is fresh.	A lot of the <u>vegetables</u> are organic
All of the...	All of the <u>meat</u> is fresh.	All of the <u>vegetables</u> are organic
Some of the...	Some of the <u>meat</u> is fresh.	Some of the <u>vegetables</u> are organic
One-half (third etc) of...	One-half of the <u>room</u> is empty	One-third of the cars on the road use unleaded fuel.

Neither and Either

With these phrases, the verb must agree with the noun that is **closest to the verb**:

*Neither the child nor her **parents are** at the school.*

*Neither the parents nor their **child is** at the school.*

*Either my brother or my **sisters usually help** me.*

*Either my sisters or my **brother usually helps** me.*

Indefinite Pronouns as subjects

A common mistake is made in subject verb agreement with **indefinite pronouns** as people often assume they must take a plural verb because they refer to more than one thing.

Here are some common examples of indefinite pronouns:

every-	some-	any-	no-
everyone	someone	anyone	no one
everybody	somebody	anybody	nobody
everything	something	anything	nothing

***Everyone seems** to be nervous about the exam.*

***Something needs** to be done about the increasing rate of crime.*

*According to the news, **Nobody is** directly responsible for the problems.*

Modal Verbs

Modal verbs are always followed by the **bare infinitive**, so in this case the third person singular no longer takes a singular verb:

*Incorrect: **He** will **takes** the bus to work.*

*Correct: **He** will **take** the bus to work.*

*Incorrect: **It** would **seems** that she is unwell.*

*Correct: **It** would **seem** that she is unwell.*

Gerunds

Gerunds (*verbs that function as nouns by adding -ing*) always take a **singular subject**. Remember to look at the gerund, not the noun that may come between the gerund and the verb:

Feeding the poor in developing countries **is** what most aid is used for.

Running my businesses **takes** up most of my time.

Typing **is** a skill that I have not yet mastered.