

# Subject verb agreement: further information



One of these cheeses **is** mild; the others **are** strong.

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Singular nouns are followed by a singular verb and plural nouns by a plural verb:

A client from Romania **was** at the seminar.

Among those present at the seminar **were** our Romanian clients.

But sometimes it is not so easy to choose the correct form:

## When the subject is a clause

| <?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />                             | Singular verb   | Plural verb  |
|--|---|--|
| <p>We regard the contents of the clause as a singular entity and use a singular verb most of the time.</p> | <p><u>Wherever you want to eat</u> <b>is</b> fine with me.</p> <p><u>To work for a big, multi-national company</u> <b>was</b> always her dream.</p> <p><u>Forgetting someone's name</u> <b>feels</b> terrible.</p>  |  |
| <p>However, in a 'what' clause, it depends on the noun that comes after the verb.</p>                      | <p>What I love most about this job <b>is</b> the <u>salary</u>.</p> <p>What we need <b>is</b> a new <u>approach</u>.</p> <p><b>Note that</b> although a plural verb is correct with a plural noun, you might hear a singular verb in informal conversation. For example:</p> <p>What I love most about this job <b>is</b> the <u>people</u>. [informal, conversational]</p> | <p>What I love most about this job <b>are</b> the <u>people</u>.</p> <p>What annoys me <b>are</b> the hundreds of <u>emails</u> I get every day.</p> |

## Nouns that can be singular or plural

Nouns that refer to a group, company or organisation can be used with either a singular or plural verb. Usually, there is little or no difference in the meaning and it doesn't matter which we use although singular verbs are preferred in formal English. `<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />`

However, we sometimes use a singular verb when we consider the group as a single entity and a plural verb when we see it as a collection of individuals - it depends what we want to say about them:

The IT team **is** based in Lyon. [the whole team]

The team **is/are** going to lunch at 1 o'clock. [the whole team or each member]

A British jury **consists** of twelve people. [the whole thing]

The jury **have** all made their decision. [each person separately]

Other examples include: audience, class, company, crowd, department, family, government, population, school and the names of companies or organisations such as the BBC, Apple, the Stock Exchange and the World Health Organisation.

### Note that

1. Most of the time, we do not make a clear and deliberate distinction between singular and plural use. Sometimes both are possible:

My family **live/lives** in Ireland.

Or it is clear from the context which to use.

The crowd **is** getting bigger. ✓

The crowd **are** getting bigger. ✗

2. There are other nouns which are always plural, such as 'police':

The police **have** arrested two men in connection with the robbery.

And some which are plural most of the time, such as 'staff':

Staff who **want** to leave early **have** to ask permission first.

## Nouns ending in 's'

The choice of verb depends on the noun. Here are some examples: `<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />`

|   | Singular verb   | Plural verb   |
|---|---|---|
| Those we see as a single entity, including the names of countries and the titles of films and publications are followed by a singular verb. | <p>Jaws <b>is</b> one of the best films of the 1970s.</p> <p>The United States <b>wants</b> to promote democracy.</p> <p>The Sunday Times <b>has</b> been published since 1821.</p>         |   |
| Some appear to be plural but are not - these include the names of some sports and illnesses.  | <p>The news <b>wasn't</b> good.</p> <p>Gymnastics <b>is</b> her favourite sport.</p> <p>Rabies <b>is</b> a life-threatening disease.</p>  |   |
| They also include some academic subjects but see below.   | <p>Physics <b>includes</b> the study of heat and light.</p>   |   |
| Some names of academic subjects also have a second, more general meaning.   | <p>Statistics <b>was</b> the most difficult part of the course.</p> <p>Politics <b>seems</b> to be a more popular subject nowadays.</p> <p>Economics <b>isn't</b> my favourite subject.</p> | <p>Reliable statistics <b>are</b> essential in market research. [information]</p> <p>His politics <b>have</b> changed as he's got older. [political beliefs]</p> <p>The economics of this industry <b>need</b> to be considered. [its financial system]</p> |

Some have no singular form and always take a plural verb.

His clothes **are** really unfashionable.

His earnings **have** shot up.

Thanks **were** given to all the participants.

Other examples include:

- belongings
- outskirts
- goods
- premises

Some have the same form in the singular and plural. My favourite means of transport **is** the train.

Several means of dealing with the situation **were** discussed.

## Irregular plural nouns

Some common irregular plural nouns are nowadays treated as singular. For example: `<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />`

This data **is** unreliable.  
**Is** it a strong bacteria?  
What **was** the criteria for the decision?

Another example is 'the media' - a collective term for different methods of broadcasting the news - although some people prefer a plural verb:

The media **was/were** responsible for influencing public opinion.  
The media **has/have** been accused of invading people's privacy.

In other contexts, 'media' is clearly plural:

Various media for delivering the training courses **are** being considered.

## Measurements, amounts and quantities

| <?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />       | Singular verb   | Plural verb   |
|--|---|---|
| A singular verb is preferred.  | <p>The Â€200 he offered <b>isn't</b> enough.</p> <p>I think 75km <b>is</b> too far to travel to work every day.</p> |   |
| With percentages, it depends whether the noun in the sentence is singular or plural. | 40% of his time <b>is</b> spent in meetings.  | 10% of the employees <b>want</b> to work in a different department. |

## More than one subject

We usually use a plural verb: <?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

My sister and I **are** going to Italy next year.

But if we see the items as a single entity, we use a singular verb:

Blackcurrant crumble and ice cream **is** my favourite dessert.  
Health and Safety **has** to be a priority for us.

## When the subject is a phrase

Be careful to match the noun to the verb:<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

The manager of the European teams **has** retired. [the manager, not 'teams have']  
The emails from the customer **have** all been dealt with. [the emails, not 'customer has']

**This is an important point to consider if you take a test in English.**

## 'One of'

'One of' is followed by a plural noun but does not take a plural verb because it refers to 'one of a pair or group':<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

One of my colleagues is sick. ✓

One of my colleagues are sick. ✗

An exception is when we add a relative pronoun. In this case, we can use either a singular or a plural verb. Here are some examples:

| + plural noun  | + plural noun + 'who'/'which'/'that'  |
|--|---|
| <b>singular verb:</b><br>One of the best things about the film <b>was</b> the music. | <b>plural or singular verb:</b><br>He's one of those people who <b>expect/expects</b> perfection. |
| One of my friends <b>speaks</b> fluent Japanese.                                     | It's one of the decisions which <b>is/are</b> very difficult to make alone.                       |

See also [Quantifiers](#) and [plural nouns](#).

## Examples



The goods **are** loaded onto ships by crane.



My family **like/likes** getting together at the weekend.



"Angels and Demons" **is** Dan Brown's second novel.



Two hours **wasn't** enough to discuss all the items on the agenda.



Moules frites **is** a popular French dish.



The outskirts of the city **are** much quieter than the centre and it's cheaper to rent a flat.



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Last update: 2023/02/14 14:32

