

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 |
|---|---|--|
| We regard the contents of the clause as a singular entity and use a singular verb most of the time. | <p><u>Wherever you want to eat</u> is fine with me.</p> <p><u>To work for a big, multi-national company</u> was always her dream.</p> <p><u>Forgetting someone's name</u> feels terrible.</p> | <p>What I love most about this job are the <u>people</u>.</p> <p>What annoys me are the hundreds of <u>emails</u> I get every day.</p> |
| However, in a 'what' clause, it depends on the noun that comes after the verb. | <p>What I love most about this job is the <u>salary</u>.</p> <p>What we need is a new <u>approach</u>.</p> <p>Note that 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 is the <u>people</u>. [informal, conversational]</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 is one of the best films of the 1970s.</p> <p>The United States wants to promote democracy.</p> <p>The Sunday Times has 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 wasn't good.</p> <p>Gymnastics is her favourite sport.</p> <p>Rabies is a life-threatening disease.</p> | |
| They also include some academic subjects but see below. | <p>Physics includes the study of heat and light.</p> | |
| Some names of academic subjects also have a second, more general meaning. | <p>Statistics was the most difficult part of the course.</p> <p>Politics seems to be a more popular subject nowadays.</p> <p>Economics isn't my favourite subject.</p> | <p>Reliable statistics are essential in market research. [information]</p> <p>His politics have changed as he's got older. [political beliefs]</p> <p>The economics of this industry need 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. | | | The Â€200 he offered isn't enough. | |
| | | | I think 75km is too far to travel to work every day. | |
| With percentages, it depends whether the noun in the sentence is singular or plural. | | | 40% of his time is spent in meetings. | 10% of the employees want 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' |
|---|---|
| singular verb: | plural or singular verb: |
| One of the best things about the film <u>was</u> the music. | He's one of those people who <u>expect/expects</u> perfection. |
| One of my friends <u>speaks</u> fluent Japanese. | It's one of the decisions which <u>is/are</u> 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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