

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. | <u>Wherever you want to eat</u> is fine with me. <u>To work for a big, multi-national company</u> was always her dream. <u>Forgetting someone's name</u> feels terrible. | |
| However, in a 'what' clause, it depends on the noun that comes after the verb. | What I love most about this job is the <u>salary</u> . What we need is a new <u>approach</u> . | What I love most about this job are the <u>people</u> . What annoys me are the hundreds of <u>emails</u> I get every day. |
| | Note that although a plural verb is correct with a plural noun, you might hear a singular verb in informal conversation. For example: What I love most about this job is the <u>people</u> . [informal, conversational] | |

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 €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: One of the best things about the film was the music. | plural or singular verb: He's one of those people who expect/expects perfection. |
| One of my friends speaks fluent Japanese. | It's one of the decisions which is/are 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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