

# 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> <b>is</b> fine with me.<br><br><u>To work for a big, multi-national company</u> <b>was</b> always her dream.<br><br><u>Forgetting someone's name</u> feels terrible.  |  |
| However, in a 'what' clause, it depends on the noun that comes after the verb.                      | <br><br><u>What I love most about this job</u> <b>is</b> the <u>salary</u> .<br><br><u>What we need</u> <b>is</b> a new <u>approach</u> .   | <br><br><u>What I love most about this job</u> <b>are</b> the <u>people</u> .<br><br><u>What annoys me</u> <b>are</b> the hundreds of <u>emails</u> I get every day. |
|   | <br><br><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:<br><br><u>What I love most about this job</u> <b>is</b> 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 <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.  |  | The €200 he offered <b>isn't</b> enough.                            |             |
|  |  | I think 75km <b>is</b> 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 <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><br>One of the best things about the film <b>was</b> the music. | <b>plural or singular verb:</b><br><br>He's one of those people who <b>expect/expects</b> perfection. |
| <br><b>One of my friends <b>speaks</b> fluent Japanese.</b>                              | <br><b>It's one of the decisions which <b>is/are</b> very difficult to make alone.</b>                |

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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