

Concord

7.18

Subject-verb concord

The most important type of concord in English is concord of number between subject and verb. Thus (3) and (4) are ungrammatical:

- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) The window is open
(sing + sing) | (3) *The window are open
(sing + plur) |
| (2) The windows are open
(plur + plur) | (4) *The windows is open
(plur + sing) |

The principle of 'proximity' denotes agreement of the verb with whatever noun or pronoun closely precedes it, sometimes in preference to agreement with the headword of the subject:

No one except his own supporters *agree* with him
One in ten *take* drugs

7.20

Collective nouns

In BrE, collective nouns, notionally plural but grammatically singular, obey notional concord in examples such as the following where AmE usually has the singular:

- | | |
|---|-----|
| The public are tired of demonstrations | [1] |
| The audience were enjoying every minute of it | [2] |

Although singular and plural verbs are more or less interchangeable in these contexts, the choice is based, if on anything, on whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body, or as a collection of individuals (*cf* 4.62). Thus plural is more likely than singular in [2], because consideration is being given to the individual reactions of members of the audience. Contrastingly, singular has to be used in sentences like *The audience was enormous*.

Tom and Mary *are* now ready ($\leftrightarrow$ Tom is now ready and Mary is now ready)
What I say and what I think *are* my own affair ($\leftrightarrow$ What I say is . . . and what I think is . . .)

- 1 The *-s* is often wrongly forgotten in the 3rd person singular of the present tense, i.e. *the stem + s*. E.g. **The student attend the language course and he study hard*. It should be *attends* and *studies*.
- 2 Frequently *has* and *have* are used wrongly, e.g. **The course have taught me a lot*. Here it should be *has*.
- 3 Mistakes are also made with *is* and *are*, and *was* and *were*, e.g. **Jose and Eduardo is from Mexico*; **Some students was late this morning*. It should be *are* and *were*.
- 4 Another common mistake is with *do* and *does*, especially in negative sentences, e.g. **He don't study Chemistry, he study Physics*. It should be *doesn't* (or *does not*) *study* and *studies*.

You must be careful to look at the subject of the verb, decide if it is singular or plural and then choose the appropriate verb form:

Stem + s, has, is, was or *does*, if singular (all end in *-s*).
stem, have, are, were or *do*, if plural.

Other points to note

- 5 Look at this sentence: *The number of students on the course is less than last year*.
 Here the subject is *the number of students on the course* but the main word is *number*. Therefore the verb must be singular *is*.
 Often a mistake is made by putting a plural verb (*are* in this case) because of the influence of a plural noun *students*.
- 6 Some nouns which are grammatically *singular* may be followed by a *plural* verb form. These are often called *collective nouns*. E.g. *The government have taken an important decision*. *The England football team were beaten by Italy*. *The class have a test on Friday*.

With collective nouns in their singular form it is usually possible to use either a singular verb or a plural verb. Therefore, *The government has taken . . .* ; *The England football team was beaten . . .* ; *The class has a test . . .* are equally correct.

- 7 Learn by heart these examples:
 - a *Almost always singular*
 (i.e. verb in singular form): *news, information, music, mathematics, phonetics, the United States, advice, evidence, accommodation, equipment*.
 e.g. *The news was very good*.
 - b *Usually singular*
aid, research.
 e.g. *His research is progressing very well*.

c

Always plural

(i.e. verb in plural form): people, police, cattle.

d e.g. The police *are* doing their best to control the traffic.

Singular and plural

(i.e. these words do *not* change; but the verb may be singular or plural according to the meaning): means, series, species, sheep, aircraft.

e.g. The series of experiments that he conducted *was* very successful.

Several species of butterfly *are* in danger of dying out.

Subject-verb concord

Exercise 105

Choose an acceptable verb, giving two answers if necessary:

- 1 Everyone of us $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{has} \\ \text{have} \end{array} \right\}$ his own burden to shoulder.
- 2 It is on each individual effort that the safety and happiness of the whole $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{depends} \\ \text{depend} \end{array} \right\}$
- 3 What are often regarded as poisonous fungi $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ sometimes safely edible.
- 4 What are these things doing here $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ what I'd like to know.
- 5 War and peace $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ a constant theme in history.
- 6 War and peace $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ alternatives between which man must constantly choose.
- 7 '*War and Peace*' $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ a fascinating novel.
- 8 The people outside $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ getting very impatient.
- 9 The public $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ demanding an official enquiry.
- 10 The Seven Sisters $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ a line of chalk cliffs on the coast of Sussex.
- 11 The seven wonders of the world $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{was} \\ \text{were} \end{array} \right\}$ well-known in ancient times.

- 12 'The Three Bears' $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ a well-known nursery story.
- 13 The Philippines $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ a large group of islands.
- 14 None but the brave $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{deserve} \\ \text{deserves} \end{array} \right\}$ the fair.
- 15 Neither John nor Mary $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{has} \\ \text{have} \end{array} \right\}$ replied to my letter.
- 16 I wrote both to John and to Mary. Neither $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{has} \\ \text{have} \end{array} \right\}$ replied.
- 17 Physics, as well as chemistry, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ taught at this school.
- 18 The employment of girls under sixteen $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ forbidden.
- 19 Everybody $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{know} \\ \text{knows} \end{array} \right\}$ what they have to do.
- 20 How is it that your answer and your neighbour's $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is} \\ \text{are} \end{array} \right\}$ identical?

Sources

Jordan, R.R. (1990). *Academic Writing Course*. Collins.

Quirk, R. & Greenbaum, S. (1993). *A University Grammar of English*. Essex: Longman.