

Agreement between subject and verb 1

Reminder → H1– H3

A

If a sentence has a singular subject, it is followed by a singular verb, and if it has a plural subject, it is followed by a plural verb; that is, the verb *agrees with the subject*. Compare:

- She** lives in China. *and* **More people** live in Asia than in any other continent.

When the subject of the sentence is complex the following verb must agree with the main noun in the subject. In the examples below the subject is underlined and the main noun is circled. Note how the verb, in italics, agrees with the main noun:

- Many leading members of the opposition party *have* criticised the delay.
 The only excuse that he gave for his actions *was* that he was tired.

The verb must agree with the subject when the subject follows the verb (see Units 99 & 100):

- Displayed on the board **were** the exam results. (*compare* The exam results were displayed ...)

B

If the subject is a clause, we usually use a singular verb:

- To keep these young people in prison *is* inhuman.
 Having overall responsibility for the course *means* that I have a lot of meetings.
 Whoever took them *remains* a mystery.

However, if we use a **what-clause** as subject (see Unit 98B), we use a singular verb if the following main noun is singular, and either a singular or a plural verb if the following main noun is plural (although a plural verb is preferred in more formal contexts):

- What worries us *is* the poor selection **process**.
 What is needed *are* additional **resources**. (*or more colloquially ... needed is ...*)

C

Some nouns with a singular form, referring to groups of some kind, can be used with either a singular or plural form of the verb. These nouns are sometimes called *collective nouns*:

- The council** *has* (or *have*) postponed a decision on the new road.

We use a singular verb if the focus is on the institution or organisation as a whole unit, and a plural verb if the focus is on a collection of individuals. Often you can use either with very little difference in meaning, although in formal contexts (such as academic writing) it is common to use a singular verb.

Also: army, association, audience, class, club, college, commission, committee, community, company, crew, crowd, department, electorate, enemy, family, federation, generation, government, group, institute, jury, opposition, orchestra, population, press, public, school, team, university; the Bank of England, the BBC, IBM, Sony, the United Nations (specific organisations)

In some contexts we have to use a singular or a plural form of the verb.

| | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The committee usually raise their hands to vote 'Yes'. (<i>not</i> The committee usually raises its hands ...) | This is something the individuals do, not the committee as a whole. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The school is to close next year. (<i>not</i> The school are to close ...) | This is something that will happen to the school as a building or institution, not to the individuals in the school. |

D

When names and titles ending in **-s** refer to a single unit we use a singular verb. Examples include countries; newspapers; titles of books, films, etc.; and quoted plural words or phrases:

- At this time of the year *the Netherlands* **is** one hour ahead of the UK.
 The Machine Gunners **was** one of Robert Westall's most successful books.
 '*Daps*' **is** the word used in the south-west of the country for sports shoes.

Exercises

40.1 Correct ten mistakes in the italicised verbs in this museum review. **A & B**

Museums and historic sites

The Rivers Museum
Open: 9 am – 5 pm,
Mon – Sat
Entrance: Free

The Rivers Museum on the corner of Corn Street and New Road ^{houses} ~~house~~ a fascinating collection of art and other objects which begins as soon as you step through the door. Among the most eye-catching pieces in the whole collection ^{is} ~~are~~ the marble animal sculptures under two arches on the left of the entrance hall. Whoever created these figures apparently ^{remain} ~~remains~~ a mystery, but the skill of the craftspeople who worked on them ^{is} ~~are~~ obvious. Hanging on the wall directly opposite the carvings ^{is} ~~are~~ over a hundred swords from the 17th century. The narrow doorway between the arches ^{let} ~~lets~~ you into a series of smaller rooms where paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries ^{are} ~~is~~ on display. If paintings aren't your thing, the museum's incredible collection of seashells and fossils in the final room ^{are} ~~is~~ sure to be of interest. Perhaps what is most surprising about the building itself ^{are} ~~is~~ the bell tower in the small courtyard. Only since the restoration work was completed in 2011 ^{have} ~~has~~ the tower been open, and climbing the 150 steps to the top to take in the view over the city ^{is} ~~are~~ well worth the effort. Over 50 full-time staff and volunteers ^{is} ~~are~~ employed and having so many of them available to answer questions about the collection ^{add} ~~adds~~ to the pleasure of this must-see museum.

40.2 Complete each sentence with a noun from the box and an appropriate form of the verb in brackets (singular, plural or both). **C**

audience class jury orchestra press
~~team~~ the United Nations university

- The volleyball team play / plays twice a week in the summer. (*play*)
- If the to host the conference, I just don't know where we will be able to hold it. (*refuse*)
- The worldwide television for tomorrow's cup final expected to be 200 million. (*be*)
- The classical concerts throughout the year. (*perform*)
- The Waterman's Junior Book Prize three adults and three children. (*include*)
- The all passed the end-of-year exam. (*have*)
- The a picture of chaos in our schools, but it's just not like that at all. (*present*)
- ordered an investigation into the capture of members of its peace-keeping force in eastern Africa. (*have*)

40.3 If necessary, correct the mistakes in these sentences or write ✓ if they are already correct.

A-D

- The United States come top of the list of countries ranked by economic performance.
- The people I know who have seen the film say that it's really good.
- The *New Straits Times* report that tourism is booming in Malaysia.
- Northern Lights* are one of Suzanne's favourite books.
- The stairs leading to the first floor were steep and poorly lit.
- Chequers is the country house of the British Prime Minister.
- Whoever made all the mess in the kitchen have to clear it up.
- The phrase 'men in white coats' are used to talk about psychiatrists.
- The public needs to be kept informed about progress in the peace talks.
- Musical chairs are a party game where everyone dashes for a seat when the music stops.