

Agreement between subject and verb 3

A

Plural nouns

Some nouns are usually plural and take a plural verb:

- The company's **earnings** *have increased* for the last five years.

Also: belongings, clothes, congratulations, goods, outskirts, overheads, particulars (= information), premises (= building), riches, savings, stairs, surroundings, thanks

Note that **whereabouts** can be used with either a singular or plural verb, **police** and **people** always take a plural verb, and **staff** usually does:

- Police** *believe* that Thomas is in Brazil, although his exact **whereabouts** *are / is* unknown.
- Staff** *say* that the new computer system has led to greater levels of stress in their work.

B

Plural nouns used with singular verbs

Although the words **data** and **media** (= newspaper, television, etc.) are plural (singular **datum** and **medium**), they are commonly used with a singular verb. However, in formal contexts such as academic writing a plural verb is preferred. Note that other similar plurals such as **criteria** and **phenomena** (singular **criterion** and **phenomenon**) are always used with plural verbs. Compare:

- All the **data** *is* available for public inspection. (*or ... are available ...*) *and*
- I agree that the **criteria** *are* not of equal importance. (*not ... the criteria is not ...*)

C

Uncountable nouns ending in -s

Some uncountable nouns always end in -s and look as if they are plural, but when we use them as the subject they have a singular verb:

- The **news** from the Middle East *seems* very encouraging.

Also: means (= 'method' or 'money'); economics, linguistics, mathematics, phonetics, physics; politics, statistics; athletics, gymnastics; diabetes, measles, rabies

However, compare:

<i>academic subject</i>	<i>general use</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Politics <i>is</i> popular at this university.	<input type="checkbox"/> Her politics <i>are</i> bordering on the fascist. (= political belief)
<input type="checkbox"/> Statistics <i>was</i> always my worst subject.	<input type="checkbox"/> Statistics <i>are</i> able to prove anything you want them to. (= numerical information)
<input type="checkbox"/> Economics <i>has</i> only recently been recognised as a scientific study.	<input type="checkbox"/> The economics behind their policies <i>are</i> unreasonable. (= the financial system)

D

Agreement with measurements, percentages, etc.

With a phrase referring to a measurement, amount or quantity we usually prefer a singular verb:

- Only **three metres** *separates* the runners in first and second places. (*rather than ... separate ...*)
- Three hours** *seems* a long time to take on the homework. (*not Three hours seem ...*)

When the first noun in a complex subject is a percentage or a fraction the verb agrees with the noun closest to the verb. Compare:

- An inflation rate** of only 2% *makes* a difference to exports. (verb agrees with main noun) *and*
- About 50% / half of **the houses** *need* major repairs. (verb agrees with closest noun)

Where we use a singular noun that can be thought of as either a whole unit or a collection of individuals, we can use either a singular or plural verb:

- Some 80% of **the electorate** *is* expected to vote. (*or ... are expected ...*)

Exercises

42.1 If necessary, correct the italicised verbs. A & B

- 1 Dr Darsee's present whereabouts *is* unknown.
- 2 Phenomena such as sun spots *have* puzzled scientists for centuries.
- 3 Over the last decade the company's overheads *has* increased dramatically.
- 4 The research data *was* collected during the period 12th–29th July 2012.
- 5 Congratulations *goes* to Ricky Branch for his excellent exam results.
- 6 The coastal surroundings of the village *is* particularly attractive.
- 7 He feels that the media *have* criticised him unfairly.
- 8 Further particulars about the house *is* available from the owner.
- 9 People *says* the house is haunted.

42.2 Complete the sentences using suitable present simple verbs. C

- 1 Modern linguistics often said to have begun at the start of the 20th century.
- 2 I think the Senator's politics extremely right-wing.
- 3 If athletics neglected in schools, this will have a big impact on future national teams.
- 4 Measles killed a large number of children in the Nagola region.
- 5 Contact us by whatever means most convenient for you: phone, email or fax.
- 6 Recent statistics evidence of a rapid increase in living standards in Asia.

42.3 Complete these extracts from news articles with a singular or plural form of the verbs in brackets. If both singular and plural forms are possible, write both. A–D; also Unit 40

- 1 The outskirts of our cities (*have*) benefited from the new out-of-town shopping centres that (*have*) recently been built. Around a third of the population regularly (*shop*) out of town.
- 2 On average, 25 litres of water (*be*) used each day per household and as the population (*expect*) higher living standards, this figure will rise.
- 3 Some 30% of the office space in London (*be*) presently empty and the Department for Employment (*blame*) high property prices.
- 4 Three centimetres (*be*) all that separated the first two runners in last night's 10,000 metres and the sports club (*have*) declared the race a dead-heat.
- 5 The research group now (*admit*) that the criteria they used (*be*) not totally reliable, and that the figure of 85% (*be*) exaggerated.
- 6 Following last week's major art theft from the Arcon Art Gallery, the premises (*be*) searched by police last night and the owner's belongings (*have*) been taken away for further inspection.
- 7 A survey of the opinions of students (*show*) that economics (*be*) the least popular university subject. However, 90% of the economics students surveyed (*believe*) that their courses are well taught.
- 8 Sufferers from diabetes (*have*) welcomed the launch by Federex of a new drug to combat the disease. The company (*say*) that earnings from the drug (*be*) to be put back into further research.