Subject-Verb Agreement

What is Subject-Verb Agreement? This is the name for the subject noun and verb in a sentence sounding “correct.” For example, which of these sound correct?:

- Professors love summer.
- Alex love* watching TV.
- My dog loves water.
- Politicians loves texting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb (Object)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>l/ You/ We/ They</td>
<td>love grammar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/ She/ It</td>
<td>loves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that in some dialects, subject-verb agreement is not necessary; dialects do not “lack grammar” because they don’t mirror prestigious ways of speaking and writing, nor are speakers of these dialects less intelligent because of their speech.

Compound Subjects
In the example below, the subject is plural, so contend is not inflected with –s.

- Page, Plant, Jones, and Bonham (1969) contend that communication breakdowns are positively correlated with nervous episodes.

However, when more than one names forms a title, they are not counted as plural.

- Calvin and Hobbes are is a funny and at times profound comic strip.

Each/Every: When each or every + and joins two nouns, make the verb singular.

- Each cook and server contributes to the restaurant’s success.

(N)either two (n)or 1: The noun closest to the verb

- Neither your dogs nor your kid is allowed in my yard.
- Neither her kid nor her dogs are favorites of the neighbors.

Agreement with Collective-noun Subjects
In English, the countability of a noun is integral to the form of the verb, and some nouns are collective, meaning that they refer to a group of individuals (e.g. family, team, police, audience, board, jury, class, committee, etc.). In most cases, Americans tend to think of collective nouns in a singular sense, but sometimes these nouns can be switch hitters. In other words, verbs with or without –s can go with collective nouns, depending on the speaker’s conception of the noun as either a single unit or a group of individuals. Also, there is significant variation among English speakers around the world in how they conceive of—and speak about—collective nouns.

Seattle [the team] is on the attack now. This way of conceiving of the team as a singular entity is more likely to be heard in North America.

[The players of] Arsenal are setting up for a corner kick. Referring to the players of a team is more common in the UK.
Latin Nouns
Caveat Discipulus. Academia—case in point—is full of Latin nouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>datum</td>
<td>data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curriculum</td>
<td>curricula</td>
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<tr>
<td>bacterium</td>
<td>bacteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>bacillus</td>
<td>bacilli</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

We could go on *ad nauseum*, but then you would miss out on...

**Singular Indefinite Pronouns**
- another
- any
- anybody
- anyone
- anything
- each
- either
- everybody
- everyone
- everything
- much
- neither
- nobody
- no one
- one
- other
- somebody
- some one
- something

These indefinite pronouns above tend to take singular verbs, as shown here below:
- *Somebody is gonna pay for this.*
- *Each of my tweets receives international acclaim.*
- *Everything is awesome.*

Again, if you find the second example to be awkward because of the alliterative word-final -s, avoid the formulation by rephrasing (e.g. *All of my tweets receive...*)

**Plural Indefinite Pronouns**
These indefinite pronouns prefer plural verbs: *both, few, many, others, & several.*
- *Though many people are concerned about climate change, few are willing to make radical changes to their lives in an effort to slow rising global temperatures.*

**Pronouns and Gender Neutrality**
It has become common for writers to employ the plural pronouns *they/them/their* to avoid pairing a gender neutral word, such as *person*, and then using the pronouns *he/him* or *she/her* to refer to it:
- *If a stranger asks you if you want a piece of candy, tell him/her/them no.*
- *One participant in the study asked that their name be withheld.*

However, many academic readers find it irritating when they see a singular noun (e.g. stranger, participant) referred to with plural pronouns, even though the writer’s intent is to avoid making gender assumptions. Therefore, where possible, we encourage you to make the original noun plural instead of singular:
- *Everyone should work to protect his/their civil rights.* *(common)*
- *All citizens should work to protect their civil rights.* *(better)*