

Singular or Plural Verb?

One of the worst mistakes you can make in English is having the wrong verb form in the third person singular and plural.

Remember: in the present tense in the third person (he, she, it and they)

Singular Subject ----> verb stem plus **S**, *it fits*, *he sits*, etc.

Plural subject ----> verb stem without *s*, *they sit*, *they work*, etc.

NB: The plural *s* on the end of the noun/subject has nothing to do with the *s* on the end of the verb.

Writing *is* instead of *are* (and *was* instead of *were*) or vice versa, is a serious mistake in English grammar.

If you suspect that you have a tendency to make this kind of mistake, check each clause and look for the *subject* and its associated *verb*.

Remember that the subject is not always the noun closest to the verb.

E.g. The concentration (singular subject) of Cs in 27 samples was (singular verb) determined.

Note: *samples* is not the subject!

You may be forgiven in some cases. It isn't always clear whether the subject is singular or plural. Here are a few examples of tricky singulars and plurals.

- * *A number* of (i.e. several) measurements *have* been made.
- * *The number* (singular) of units *has* been reported to be 50.
- * It appears that *30 g* (plural) *are* required daily.
- * In some areas *60%* (%=singular) of the workforce *is* unemployed.
- * *The most part* (singular) of the compounds *is* inactive.
- * *A total* (singular) of 32 measurements *has* been made.
- * *The majority* (i.e. most) of the tests *were* performed in Lund.

* Kinetics, dynamics, politics and other words ending in -ics and meaning "the study of..." usually take a singular verb.

E.g.
Acoustics is the study of the behaviour of sound.

In other cases, they take a plural verb.

E.g.
The acoustics in this hall *are* terrible.

Neither, nor and **none** are treated as singular.

- * *Neither* the slope *nor* the magnitude *was* reproduced by the model.
- * *Neither* of the models *was* correct.
- * *None* of the fits to the data *was* adequate.

Other tricky cases

- * *The liquid*, together with the vapour, *returns* to the chamber. Here the subject of the clause is "the liquid" not "the liquid and the vapour".

It sometimes helps to rearrange the sentence if you're not sure which verb form to use.

- * *The liquid returns* to the chamber, together with the vapour.

OR

- * *The liquid and the vapour return* to the chamber. (Not as interesting but it says what you mean.)

The verb to be, present (past)

Person	Singular	Plural
First	I am (was)	we are (were)
Second	you are (were)	you are (were)
Third	he, she, it is (was)	they are (were)

The verb to have, present (past)

Person	Singular	Plural
First	I have (had)	we have (had)
Second	you have (had)	you have (had)
Third	he, she, it has (had)	they have (had)

Regular verbs, e.g. to work, present (past)

Person	Singular	Plural
First	I work (worked)	we work (worked)
Second	you work (worked)	you work (worked)
Third	he, she, it works (worked)	they work (worked)