

Subject verb agreement: some problem points

Collective nouns

Collective nouns are usually treated as singular and take singular verbs. However, they may take a plural verb when we are talking about the individual members within the group.

An unruly mob was gathering outside.

The mob were (i.e., members) scattered in all directions.

A number of

The phrase a number of should be followed by a plural noun and a plural verb.

A number of objections were raised against the proposal.

A number of issues still need to be resolved.

When the sentence begins with 'The number of', the verb should be singular.

The number of available jobs is shrinking rapidly. (Here the subject is 'number', not 'jobs'.)

A half of, a part of

Fractional expressions such as a half of, a part of and a majority of can be followed by a singular or a plural verb. It depends on the meaning.

A large percentage of the population is angry with the ruling party.

Nearly 60 percent of the members are in favor of the new policy.

The expression 'more than one' takes a singular verb.

More than one student has tried to cheat on the exam.

More than one person has been diagnosed with swine flu.

A positive and a negative subject together

When you put a positive and a negative subject together, the verb must agree with the positive subject.

The members, but not the chairman, have decided to vote against the proposal. (Here the

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plural verb have agrees with the positive subject 'the members'.)

It is his attitude, not his ideas, that invites criticism.

A plural noun that names a single subject

When a group of words containing a plural noun represents a single object, you must use a singular verb.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer was enjoyed by us all.

Gulliver's Travels was written by Jonathan Swift.

Thrice-told Tales is an interesting book.

None

None should be used with a singular verb. A plural verb is also possible in a less careful style.

None of his friends was there to help him. (Formal)

None of his friends were there to help him. (Less formal)