The basic rule of subject-verb agreement is simple: plural nouns take plural verbs and singular nouns take singular verbs. However, some circumstances make subject-verb agreement more complicated.

1) There is a compound subject. When there are two subjects joined by and, the verb is plural.

My Mom and Dad are wonderful people.

When there are two subjects joined by or, the verb agrees with whichever subject is closer.

My Mom or my brothers drive me to school.

My brothers or my Mom drives me to school.

PRACTICE:

My second-grade teacher and my high school coach was/were a big influence on me.

Either the students or the teacher needs/need to report the incident to the administration.

2) The subject is very long, or there are modifiers between the subject and verb.

A catalog of courses and requirements often baffles students.

PRACTICE:

His repertoire of classical songs and arias is/are impressive.

The lack of people skills among the administrators is/are very troubling.

In this light, the autumn leaves on the trees at the top of the hill looks/look on fire.
3) The subject and verb are not in the usual order. This often happens in questions and in sentences beginning with "there is" or "there are".

   There is a very good movie playing this week.
   There are many types of movies that I enjoy.
   Is the test tomorrow?
   Are the votes all counted?

PRACTICE:

   There was/were some memorable times in basketball and I will miss the competition.
   Do/does your sisters want to come along?
   There is/are no reason to get angry.

4) In a relative clause with "who", "that", or "which" as the subject, the verb agrees with whatever the relative clause modifies.

   A fable is a short story that conveys a moral.
   Politicians ought to listen to the people who vote for them.

PRACTICE:

   We need to hire a person who has/have good computer skills.
   I can't stand people who mess/messes with other people's business.

5) Collective nouns are singular in form and refer to groups. They can take either singular or plural verbs, depending on whether the writer is thinking of the group as a whole or as individuals, but are typically treated as singular.

   The committee is considering the proposal.
   The old group is having a reunion.
6) Some nouns are plural in form, but singular in meaning, and take singular verbs.

   No news is good news.

   Statistics is a difficult course.

PRACTICE:

   Ten days is/are too long to wait for car repairs.

   The audience of 500 people was/were thrilled.

7) Certain words are singular even though they are used when talking about a group of people or things.

   ‘Type’ is singular because it refers to an entire category, regardless of how many there are in the category.

   There are two types of people. The first type is the type that divides people into types.

   ‘Each’ is singular.

   Each of my parents has taught me important lessons.

   ‘Neither’ and similar words that refer to nothing or no one are treated as singular.

   Ten people live in that house, but no one is home.

   None of these books is any good.

   Neither of my classes has a final exam.
Subject-Verb Agreement: Practice

Underline each verb and determine whether it agrees with its subject.

1. The contrast between these two environments is extremely strong.
2. Everyone has certain duties they perform every day that constitutes some sort of exercise.
3. Reduced stress can reduce friction within an employee group, which then work together more productively.
4. Weinstein & Associates are a consulting firm that try to make business people laugh.
5. Many things has influenced me to continue my education.
6. One of these reasons have been my parents.
7. My father, mother, and brother has been a big influence on me.
8. These things I've listed are the major changes that has occurred in my life.
9. The characters on Days of Our Lives is what makes it the most entertaining show that I watch.
10. There has been at least two or three divorces in my family.
11. The morals, respect, and love from my parents makes me the happy person I am.
12. Janet is the only one of my friends who have not been divorced.
13. Fish and chips are a popular meal in England.
14. The faculty have decided to make some changes in the core curriculum.
15. The papers on the top of the pile are the most important.
16. There is a lot of rules to be learned before one can play this game.
17. During the divorce, my friends and family was very supportive.
18. Friends is her favorite TV show.
19. Neither of these places are very far from home.
20. These type of people really annoy me.

21. Being a thief, a racist, or a hypocrite is bad. Each have bad characteristics.

22. The loyal and dedicated people who works at these facilities are thanked every day by the smile on our faces.

23. As long as there is golf courses around, there will always be a place for me to go relax and enjoy great natural beauty.

24. They can just play and have fun, not knowing that the hardest part of their lives is ahead of them.

25. The reasons a student goes to college vary.

26. Each of these three types of annoying people possesses a quality that I love to hate.