Subject-Verb Agreement IV: Compound Subjects

When two or more subjects are joined by a conjunction, the result is a compound subject. A compound subject joined by the conjunction **and** is usually plural and therefore requires a verb that does not end in *s*.

Examples: The house and the barn belong to Sam's family.
A slice of toast and a glass of juice are on the table.

When two or more subjects are joined by the conjunction or **or nor**, the verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it (usually the second subject).

**Exercise One:** In each sentence below, underline the verb that agrees with the subject.

1. Ben and Pete (want, wants) to buy a new computer.
2. The color and style (is, are) important to most teenagers.
3. The price or warranty (is, are) not as important as other factors.
4. Neither a new television nor stereo (interest, interests) Ben and Pete.
5. A large monitor and quality sound (impress, impresses) them.
6. The manager and sales clerk (try, tries) to convince them to buy an expensive model.
7. Neither Ben nor Pete (want, wants) to make a rush decision about the computer.
8. Video editing and computer graphics (provide, provides) new possibilities for the user.
9. Most people know when a computer system or program (work, works) properly, and they can usually do minor repairs themselves.
10. A computer course and a reference guide (is, are) necessary for serious users.
11. A new keyboard or mouse (attract, attracts) those interested in upgrading their systems.
12. The sales clerk or the parents (select, selects) age-appropriate computer games for children.
13. Neither the directions on the package nor the brochure (explain, explains) how to play the game.
14. Both the hard drive and the software installed on our old computer (is, are) damaged.
Exceptions: Though subjects joined by and are usually considered plural, there are two exceptions to this rule.

Exception One: When the two subjects are really naming one person or thing, the subject is singular and the verb should end in s.

Macaroni and cheese is my favorite food.
The librarian and reading teacher is Mrs. Jones.

Exception Two: When the word every precedes a compound subject, it makes that subject singular, and the verb should end in s.

Every dog and cat has been vaccinated.

Exercise Two: In each sentence below, underline the verb that agrees with the subject.

1. (Does, Do) every boy and girl in kindergarten visit the museum?
2. Clowns and fools, as well as heroes, (appear, appears) in many of Shakespeare's plays.
3. Either the plaintiff or the defendant (has, have) changed his mind about the suit.
4. Neither the President nor his family members (was, were) safe.
5. Fish and chips (is, are) a specialty of local restaurants.
6. Every dog and cat (is, are) required to wear a tag certifying that it has been vaccinated.
7. The cook and housekeeper (is, are) paid a larger salary than the gardener because of the extra requirements of her job.
8. Rain, snow, or fog (is, are) hazardous to beginning drivers.
9. (Do, Does) dogs and monkeys have the ability to think?
10. Both Jane and her brother (like, likes) riding horses.

This handout is adapted from the Hinds Community College Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.