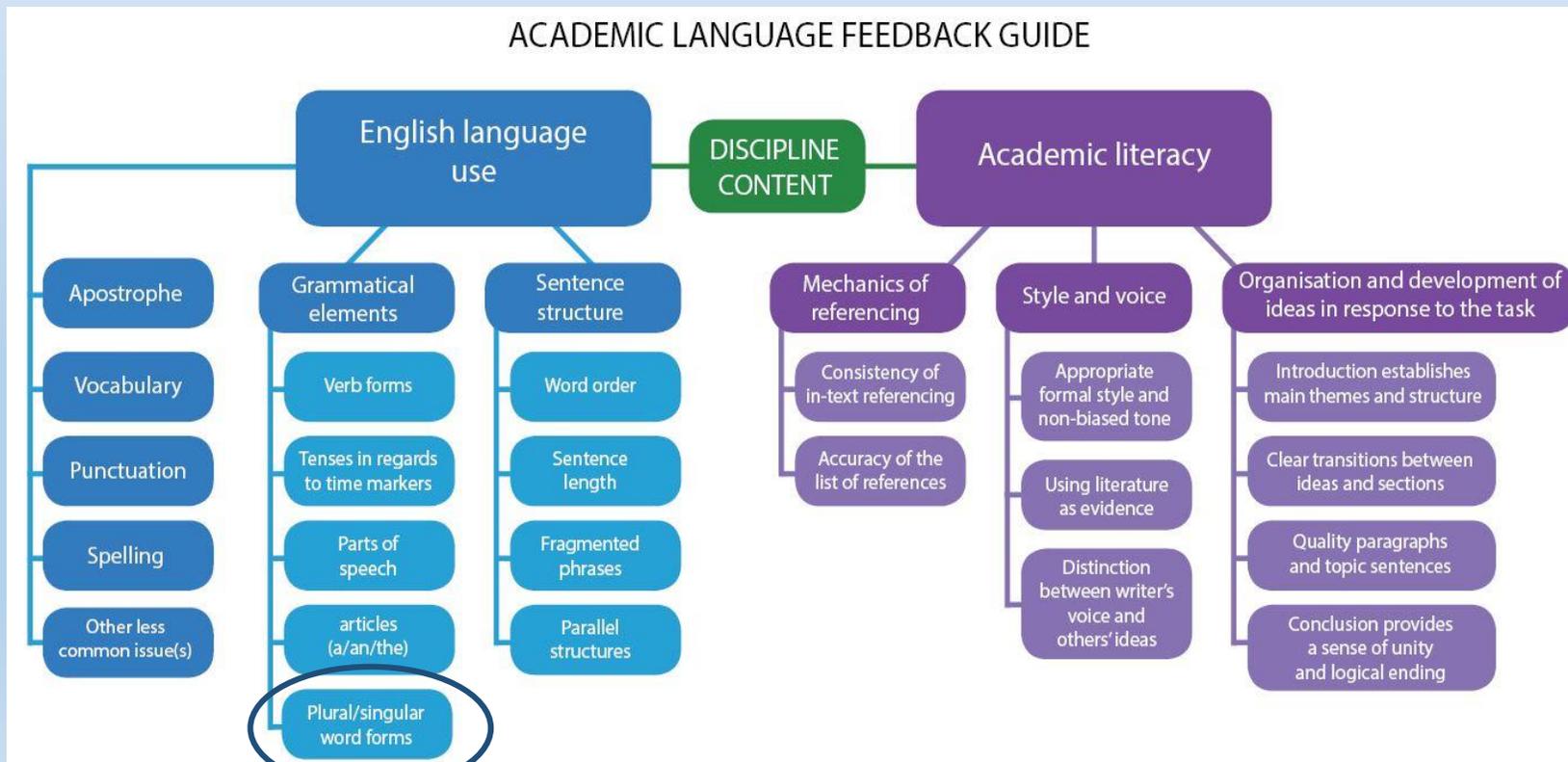


Plural and singular forms



Dr Anna Podorova,
Ms Julia Ghazarian,
Dr Amber McLeod
Faculty of Education,
Updated 6 February 2017

Revisit

Why is it important to understand singular and plural word forms?

Singular and plural word forms are important because they distinguish one thing from many. The use of correct singular and plural word forms means that the grammatical structure of sentences will be correct. The use of singular and plural forms is linked to:

1. Knowing the rules of forming singular and plural.
2. The use of countable and uncountable nouns.
3. Correct matching of the singular or plural subject with the singular or plural verb (also known as subject-verb agreement).

Variation in formation of regular plural noun forms

Adding an 's' to singular nouns is one of the most frequent ways to change singular into plural:

Spelling rules	Singular	Plural
Simply add an 's' to a singular form	<i>student</i> <i>boy</i>	<i>students</i> <i>boys</i>
If 'y' is preceded by a consonant, change 'y' to 'ie' before adding 's'	<i>country</i> <i>university</i>	<i>countries</i> <i>universities</i>
If a singular form ends in ch, sh, s, x, or z, add 'es'	<i>branch</i>	<i>branches</i>

In English, there are many nouns which do not follow the regular pattern of forming singular or plural. Some words such as university subjects or activities may look plural but are used as a singular nouns. For example:

*The **news** about university rankings **was** in all Australian newspapers.*

***Maths** (=mathematics) **is** a challenging subject.*

Exceptions in formation of plural noun forms: plural-looking nouns

Some words look plural but they can be either plural or singular depending on the context:

<i>Rules</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
The word is the same but is used as singular or plural depending on a context.	<i>Demographics is a study of information about various populations.</i> <i>Statistics is the science of collecting, analyzing and interpreting numbers and numerical data.</i>	<i>Such diverse student demographics are representative of universities across Australia.</i> <i>The statistics indicate a gradual increase in international student enrolments.</i>

Exceptions in formation of plural noun forms: Latin and other foreign origins

<i>Rules</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
Remember irregular singular and plural forms for Latin words	<i>alumnus</i> <i>appendix</i> <i>crisis</i> <i>criterion</i> <i>curriculum</i> <i>datum</i> <i>thesis</i>	<i>alumni</i> <i>appendices</i> <i>crises</i> <i>criteria</i> <i>curricula</i> <i>data</i> <i>theses</i>

Examples:

Based on *this* specific *criterion*, researchers differentiate between native and non-native speakers of English.

Success *criteria* for such programs *vary* across the sector.

Exceptions in formation of singular and plural noun forms: always plural

‘Plural only’ nouns are always used in a plural form. However, sometimes you need to talk about one, or more than one, of these nouns.

<i>Rules</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>More than 1</i>
‘A pair of’ or ‘pairs of’ for ‘plural only’ nouns such as glasses, headphones, jeans, scissors, sunglasses	<i>A pair of scissors is on the table = Scissors are on the table).</i> <i>My new headphones are not working. = My new pair of headphones isn’t working.)</i>	<i>Several pairs of scissors were brought to the lab.</i> <i>Several pairs of headphones were not working last time.</i>

Exceptions in formation of singular and plural noun forms: uncountable nouns

It is important to know which nouns are countable and uncountable in English. The rules may be different from other languages so it is important to check this information in a dictionary when you are using a word you are not very familiar with.

Uncountable nouns cannot be counted and are always considered singular but sometimes you need to talk about one or more than one of these nouns. We use 'a something of' phrase (for example, *a piece of, a bottle of, a box of, an item of, an article of, etc.*) as well as *little/much* and *all/no/some/any*.

<i>Examples of uncountable nouns</i>	<i>1 or little</i>	<i>More than 1 or much</i>
Advice, electricity, equipment, furniture, information, knowledge, luggage, money, music, news, research.	<i>A piece of advice is always welcome.</i> <i>Knowledge of grammar rules needs to be applied in real-life settings.</i>	<i>All this advice about university study was extremely valuable.</i> <i>Much knowledge about student expectations was acquired during the research process.</i>

Avoiding common mistakes with plural and singular forms: subject-verb agreement

A singular or plural subject must match with a singular or plural verb. It is known as subject-verb agreement:

<i>Rules</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
A singular subject takes a singular verb; a plural subject takes a plural verb. Pay attention to phrases between subjects and verbs as they may cause confusion.	<i>The folder with resources is on your Moodle site.</i> <i>Sam, as well as all the other students, was going to the seminar.</i>	<i>The folders with resources are on your Moodle site.</i> <i>All the students, including Sam, were going to the seminar.</i>
When two or more subjects are joined by the conjunction “ <i>and</i> ”, a plural verb is used.		<i>My mother and sister live in Tasmania.</i>
When “ <i>or</i> ” or “ <i>nor</i> ” are used in a sentence, the verb should agree with the noun (or pronoun) closest to the verb.	<i>My friend or my lecturer is going to help me.</i> <i>Neither the students, nor the lecturer knows what to do.</i>	<i>My lecturer or my friends are going to help me.</i> <i>Neither the lecturer, nor the students know what to do.</i>

Avoiding mistakes with plural and singular forms: subject-verb agreement (cont.)

<i>Rules</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
The words <i>everything, everybody, everyone</i> mean more than one thing or person but are treated as singular nouns.	<i>Everyone was</i> happy to be at a university. <i>Everything is</i> ready.	
The words <i>each</i> and <i>every</i> are used with singular nouns and singular verbs.	<i>Every primary, secondary and tertiary student needs</i> to study consistently. <i>Each boy and girl is</i> going to the orientation.	
Collective nouns (for example, <i>audience, committee, crew, government, team, police, etc.</i>) can be used with plural or singular verbs depending on their function	= a group as a whole <i>The police comes</i> quickly if you press this button.	= a collection of individuals <i>The police were</i> extremely helpful and responded to all our questions very politely.

Quick tips

Quick tips

Ask yourself, “One or many?” when using nouns, pronouns and verbs in sentences.

Understand subject and verb agreement, including how this works in sentences where the subject and the verb are separated.

Learn the singular, plural, countable and uncountable noun forms for your discipline.

Learn more

Useful links on plural and singular forms

[Count and uncount nouns, Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)

[Making subjects and verbs agree, Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)

[Nouns, singular and plural, from English Grammar Today, Cambridge University Press](#)

[Uncountable nouns, English Club](#)

[Module 5: Subject/Verb agreement, ASCENT, Monash University](#)

Face-to-face support

Who can help with English at Monash?

[English Connect](#) –
conversational circles,
peer feedback on your
writing and grammar
workshops



Grammar books

- Azar, B. S. & Hagen, S.A. (2009). *Understanding and using English grammar (4th ed.)*. USA: Pearson Longman.
- Borjars, K. & Burridge, K. *Introducing English grammar (2nd ed.)*. London: Hodder Education.
- Foley, M. & Hall, D. (2012). *MyGrammarLab (Advanced)*. England: Pearson.
- Hewings, M. (2012). *Advanced grammar in use: a reference and practice book for advanced students of English (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, R. (2011). *English Grammar in Use (Intermediate) (3 ed.)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Copyright © Monash University (2017). All rights reserved. Except as provided in the Copyright Act 1968, this work may not be reproduced in any form without the written permission of English Connect web administrator. Material created by Dr Anna Podorova, Ms Julia Ghazarian and Dr Amber McLeod.