SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Does my verb need –s or not?

You are writing a paper and have written:

Accounting standards developed by the AASB, IASB, and FASB ______ not always agree.

What do you write – do or does?

How about these?

Any of these sentences ______ confusing. (is/are)

Every boy, girl, man and woman ______ important. (is/are)

Salt and pepper ______ always on the table. (is/are)

Rice and curry ______ my favourite dish. (is/are)

The instructions ______ that 300 grams of salt ______ to be added. (say/says; is/are)

Physics ______ the science of matter and energy. (is/are)

Two fish or a cat ______ what I want for a pet. (is/are)

*Her family ______ very hospitable. (is/are)

*None of the universities _____ going to open a campus in Antarctica. (is/are)

If any of these is are confusing, then this guide is for you.

Subjects and verbs in (formal) English

The basic rule in English is that your verb is always determined by the subject of your sentence.

My class is interesting. And My classes are interesting.
These are the basic guidelines for determining whether your verb should have –s at the end:

1. The subject and verb might have many words between them. The subject still controls the verb:
   - This university, which is made up of many students, teachers, and others, is large.
   - The colours of a gas spectrum tell its chemical composition.
   - The effect which these reactions caused during the last three weeks is insignificant.

2. Subjects with two or more parts joined by ‘and’ usually require a plural verb:
   - Krypton and neon are noble gasses.
   - Salt and pepper are always on the table.
   - BUT!!! If two subjects are thought of as a single thing, then use a singular verb:
     - Fish and chips is my favourite dish.

3. Subjects with two or more parts joined by or, nor, neither... nor... either... or..., not only... but also... require the verb to agree with the final noun:
   - Salt or pepper is always on the table.
   - Real estate or securities are a suitable investment at this time.
   - Neither stocks nor real estate is a good investment at the moment.

4. In sentences that begin with here or there, the subject is after the verb, and determines the verb:
   - There are four students in my presentation group.
   - There is a single main idea in my first paragraph.

5. Certain groups of words look plural, but are singular. This is especially true for subjects and disciplines, and for illnesses:
   - Physics is the science of matter and energy.
   - Diabetes is a terrible disease.

   Other words in these categories include economics, electronics, mathematics, and measles, mumps, and shingles.
6. When writing about measurements, the singular verb is usually used:

*Four kilograms of kryptonite was* deadly to Superman.

7. The indefinite pronouns *everybody, everyone, everything* take singular verbs:

*Everything in chemistry* is explainable in atomic terms.

8. However, plural determiners like *few, many, several, both, all, some* take plural verbs:

*Many of my fellow students are* ready for their presentations today.

*Few things at university are* more valuable than making good friends.

9. Collective nouns often take singular verbs:

*My family* is very supportive of my studies here.

However, they also may take plural verbs:

*My family are* very supportive of my studies here.

Which is correct? Often it depends on how you think of the group: *My family* as a single unit, or *My family* as several individuals. Other collective nouns like this include *team, class, cohort, government, crowd,* and *orchestra*.

10. *All of, any of, enough of, more of, most of, none of, some of, a quantity of,* and similar subjects can take a singular or plural noun. The best guide is to look at the object of the preposition *of*:

*None of this material* is suitable for industrial applications.

*None of these materials are* suitable for industrial applications.

11. Titles take singular verbs. This is for books, movies, songs, stories, and the like:

*The Regulations of the Senate* is a very important document.

*The Annals of the Australian Historical Society is edited* by Dr Proctor.
Adapted from:


*Style manual: for authors, editors and printers* 2002, 6th edn, John Wiley & Sons Australia, Milton, Queensland.