

Tricky Plurals

There are four groups of words which some speakers and writers have difficulty with. In each case it has to do with the agreement of plurals or plural-looking words with the verbs or other words they go with.

Plural-looking Nouns

Some nouns that end in **-s** look like they are plural, but they really are singular. This is particularly true of branches of knowledge, certain foods or dishes, and certain diseases.

Branches of knowledge like **mathematics, physics, ethics, politics, or social studies** are singular.

Names of foods, while plural, are treated singularly when they are treated as a single dish.

Baked beans is one of my favorite dishes.

Bread and butter is her breakfast staple.

Some diseases, while plural in origin, are treated singularly because just one disease is discussed: **measles, mumps, rickets, or pox.**

Mumps has been nearly eradicated in the U.S.

A few words, though singular in nature, are made of paired items and generally treated as plural: **scissors, pants, trousers, glasses, pliers, tongs, tweezers,** and the like. Many are often used with the word **pair** as in **pair of pants** or **pair of scissors.**

Example: These scissors are too dull to cut with.

Nouns Expressing Measurement

A noun expressing an amount or **measurement** is normally singular.

If the unit of measurement refers to a number of **individual** items, then it treated as a plural.

Examples: Two spoons of sugar is too much for me.

(A single measurement)

Twelve dollars is less than what I want to sell it for.

(A single sum of money)

Four-fifths of the country is satisfied with its health insurance.

(One part of a whole)

Four-fifths of the people are satisfied with their health insurance.

(*Four-fifths* refers to many individuals.)

Titles

Titles of books and other works of art are always considered singular even if the title sounds plural.

The Alfred Hitchcock film **The Birds** was successfully advertised with a campaign that said, "**The Birds** is coming!" Unlike so many ads, that one was grammatically correct.

Plurals That Do Not End in -s

A number of plurals, mostly derived from Latin, do not end in **-s**. Nevertheless, they are plural and should be treated as such. Words such as **criteria**, **phenomena**, **memoranda**, and **media** are plural. Their singular forms are **criterion**, **phenomenon**, **memorandum**, and **medium**.

The word **data** is also technically plural, but the singular form, **datum**, is rare in English, so using **data** as singular is tolerated, but not precisely correct. Say "piece of data" or "item of data" for the singular if **datum** sounds too affected.