

What Do/Does the Data Show?

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You're editing a document when you come across this sentence: "Follow-up data from a large sample was used to estimate the incidence of carcinoma." Sounds good. Right? Wait, should it be "Follow-up data from a large sample were..." instead? Is the word *data* a singular or plural noun? Yes.

There are generally 2 approaches when it comes to words such as *data* and *bacteria*, common terms that are of Latin origin and appear often in scientific documents. One is more of a "purist" approach, treating these words as the plural nouns they are in Latin (singular forms would be *datum* and *bacterium*). The other is a more contemporary-language approach, recognizing that modern English speakers would rarely if ever use the word *datum* in common parlance, and perhaps not even in formal scientific writing.

So which is it? Well, reference sources themselves vary in their recommendations. The Plurals chapter (chapter 9) in the *AMA Manual of Style*, 11th edition, notes: "A few nouns are usually used in the plural form; however, the distinction between plural and singular should be retained where appropriate" and gives the following examples: *data/datum*, *criteria/criterion*, *media/medium*, and *phenomena/phenomenon*.¹ Ok makes sense: "The data are what they are."

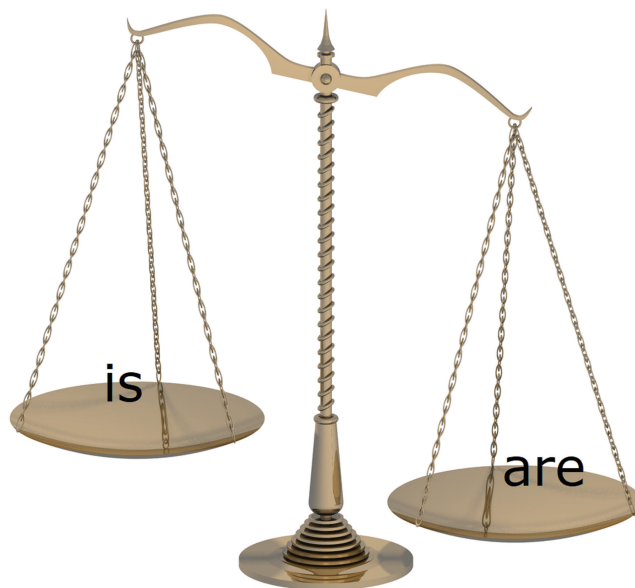
But wait, there is a footnote on that page:

Exception: when referring to social media, news media, or the media, use a singular verb. The same applies when referring to big data as a term for extremely large, often unstructured data sets that can be mined for business or social uses.

So if you follow AMA style, *data* would indeed be considered a plural in most contexts, with the caveat above. The same is true for those who follow APA style, which also recommends observing the distinction between singular and plural forms.²

In checking with *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary regarding the term *data*, the ambivalence in usage is pronounced: both singular and plural constructions are considered standard.³ I note with slight amusement the last sentence of the dictionary's usage guide: "The plural construction is more common in print, evidently because the house style of several publishers mandates it."

The *AP Stylebook* echoes the dual approaches: *data* as singular for lay audiences and plural for scientific and academic writing.⁴ The *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th



edition, also acknowledges both approaches, but similar to those mentioned above, points out that in the sciences and other formal contexts, the term *data* is usually plural.⁵

A variety of other blog entries, podcasts, and articles on grammar and usage echo these sentiments; essentially, the plural construction of *data* is still widely used in scientific communication. The singular form is embraced for most other contexts. In this usage, *data* is thought of as a collective noun and, when considered as a unit rather than as the individual items of data that compose it, it takes the singular verb.

But whichever approach you take, heed the *Chicago Manual's* recommendation: "[M]ake your play and be consistent—vacillating will not win the admiration of readers and listeners." Which of course is sound advice for any editing decision.

References and Links

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2. American Psychological Association (APA). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 7th ed. Washington, DC: APA; 2020:161
3. Merriam-Webster Inc. *Data*. In: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc. [accessed November 30, 2020]. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/data>
4. The Associated Press (AP). *Data*. In: *AP Stylebook*. New York, NY: AP. [accessed November 29, 2020]. https://www.apstylebook.com/ap_stylebook/data
5. Garner B. Plural form with singular sense. In: *Chicago Manual of Style*. 17th ed. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago. [accessed November 29, 2020]. <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/book/ed17/part2/ch05/psec014.html>

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