Introduction

Nouns are everywhere in our writing. But what are all the types of nouns you come across, and how do you use them?

A noun is a word that names something, such as a person, place, thing, or idea. In a sentence, nouns can play the role of **subject**, **direct object**, **indirect object**, **subject complement**, **object complement**, **appositive**, or **modifier**.

Some noun examples include:

- *dog*
- *motoycle*
- John
- *Kuala Lumpur*

Types of nouns

Nouns form a large proportion of English vocabulary, and they come in a wide variety of types.

Nouns can name a person:

Albert Camus
the **president**
my **sister**
a **boy**

Nouns can name a place:

Mount Vesuvius
Disneyland
my **house**

Nouns can name things:

Things might include intangible things, such as concepts, activities, or processes. Some might even be hypothetical or imaginary things.

shoe
faucet
freedom
The **Elder Wand**
basketball

Proper nouns vs. common nouns

One important distinction to be made is whether a noun is a **proper noun** or a **common noun**. A proper noun is a specific name of a person, place, or thing and is always capitalized.

*Does **Tina** have much homework to do this evening?*

Tina is the name of a specific person.

*I would like to visit **Old Faithful.***

Old Faithful is the specific name of a geological phenomenon.

The opposite of a proper noun is a common noun, sometimes known as a generic noun. A common noun is the generic name of an item in a class or group and is not capitalized unless appearing at the beginning of a sentence or in a title.

*The **girl** crossed the **river**.*

Girl is a common noun; we do not learn the identity of the girl by reading this sentence, though we know the action she takes. *River* is also a common noun in this sentence.

Types of common nouns

Common or generic nouns can be broken down into three subtypes: **concrete nouns**, **abstract nouns**, and **collective nouns**. A concrete noun is something that is perceived by the senses; something that is physical or real.

*I heard the **doorbell**.*
*My **keyboard** is sticky.*

Doorbell and *keyboard* name real things that can be sensed.

Conversely, an abstract noun is something that cannot be perceived by the senses.

*We can't imagine the **courage** it took to do that.*

Courage is an abstract noun. Courage can't be seen, heard, or sensed in any other way, but we know it exists.

A [collective noun](#) denotes a group or collection of people or things.

*That **pack** of lies is disgraceful.*

Pack as used here is a collective noun. Collective nouns take a singular verb, as they refer to the collection of people or things they identify as one entity—in this case, the singular verb *is*.

*A **pride** of lions roamed the savanna.*

Pride is also a collective noun.

Nouns and number

All nouns are either singular or plural in number. A singular noun refers to one person, place, thing, or idea and requires a singular verb, while a plural noun refers to more than one person, place, thing, or idea and requires a plural verb.

Forming plural nouns

Many English plural nouns can be formed by adding *-s* or *-es* to the singular form, although there are also many exceptions.

cat→cats
*These two **cats** are both black.*

Note the plural verb *are*.

tax→taxes
house→houses

Countable nouns vs. uncountable nouns

Concrete and abstract common nouns can be further classified as either countable or uncountable. Countable nouns are nouns that can be counted, even if the resulting number would be extraordinarily high (like the number of humans in the world). Countable nouns can be singular or plural and can be used with numbers and modifiers like *a/an*, *the*, *some*, *any*, *a few*, and *many*.

*Here is **a cat**.*
*Here are **a few cats**.*
*Here are **eight cats**.*

Uncountable nouns, or mass nouns, are nouns that are impossible to count, whether because they name intangible concepts (e.g., *information*, *animal husbandry*, *wealth*), collections of things that are considered as wholes (e.g., *jewelry*, *equipment*, the *working class*), or homogeneous physical substances (e.g., *milk*, *sand*, *air*). Although most of these nouns are singular in form, because they refer to things that can't be isolated and counted on their own, they are never used with the singular indefinite article *a* or *an*. Singular concrete uncountable nouns can often be expressed in countable units by adding a countable noun like *piece* (with *of*). On their own, uncountable nouns can be modified by the definite article, *the*, or indefinite adjectives like *some*.

*They'd love to rent **some property** around here.*
*They'd love to rent **a piece of property** around here.*
*Students don't seem to have **much homework** these days.*
*Could you help me move **the furniture** into the other room?*

Nouns and the possessive case

The possessive case shows the relationship of a noun to other words in a sentence. That relationship can be ownership, possession, occupancy, a personal relationship, or another kind of association. The possessive of a singular noun is formed by adding an apostrophe and the letter *s.*

The **cat's toy** *was missing.*

The cat possesses the toy, and we denote this by use of -'*s* at the end of *cat.*

Casey's sister *is a geologist.*

Here, the possessive case indicates the relationship between Casey and their sister.

The **novel's release** *made quite a splash.*

In the above example, the possessive case is denoting that *novel* is in the role of object in relationship to *release*; someone released the novel.

The possessive of a plural noun that ends in –*s* or –*es* is formed by adding just an apostrophe.

My **nieces'** *prom outfits were exquisite.*

The possessive of an irregular plural noun is formed by adding – *'s.*

The **children's** *drawings were hung on the walls.*

When a singular noun ends in the letter *s* or *z*, the general rule of adding – *'s* often applies.

I have been invited to my **boss's** *house for dinner.*
Ms. Sanchez's *coat is still hanging on the back of her chair.*

This is a matter of a style, however, and some style guides call for leaving off the *s* after the apostrophe.

Brussels' *cathedrals attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.*

Whichever style an organization or writer chooses should be used consistently.

Functions of nouns

Nouns take on different roles based on their relationships to the rest of the words in a sentence.

Nouns as subjects

Every sentence must have a **subject**, and that subject will always be a noun or [pronoun](). The subject of a sentence is the person, place, or thing that is doing or being or experiencing whatever is described by the [verb]() of the sentence.

Maria *played the piece beautifully.*

The noun *Maria* is the subject of this sentence; it tells us who is performing the action described by the sentence's verb (*played*).

Nouns as objects

Nouns can also be **objects** of a [transitive verb]() in a sentence. An object can be either a **direct object** (a noun that receives the action described by the verb) or an **indirect object** (a noun that receives direct object).

Cleo passed the ***salt****.*
Cleo passed ***Otto*** *the* ***salt****.*

In both of the above sentences, the noun *salt* is the direct object of the verb *passed*; the salt is what Cleo passed. In the second sentence, there is also an indirect object: the noun *Otto*. Otto is the person to whom Cleo passed the salt; Otto is the recipient of the salt. A good way to identify an indirect object in a sentence is to ask yourself to whom/what or for whom/what something is being done.

Nouns as subject and object complements

Another role nouns sometimes perform in a sentence is that of a **subject complement**. A subject complement normally follows a [linking verb]() such as *be*, *become*, or *seem* and gives more information about the subject of the sentence.

Mary is a ***teacher****.*

In this sentence, the noun *teacher* is being used as a subject complement. A teacher is what Mary is.

A related function of nouns is to act as an **object complement**, which provides more information about the direct object of a sentence with a transitive verb.

I now pronounce you ***husbands****.*

Husbands is a noun used as an object complement in this sentence. Verbs that denote making, naming, or creating are often followed by nouns behaving as object complements.

Nouns as appositives

A noun used as an [**appositive**]() immediately follows another noun in order to further define or identify it. You can also say that the second noun is in apposition to the first noun.

My brother, ***Michael****, is six years old.*

Michael is an appositive here, further identifying the noun phrase *my brother*. Appositives can be **restrictive or nonrestrictive**; in the above example, we can see from the fact that it is set off between commas that *Michael* is nonrestrictive—that is, it could be left out of the sentence without leaving out essential information about who is six years old. In other words, we can surmise that Michael is the writer's only brother; telling us his name is extra information about him. Here is a version of the same sentence where the appositive is used restrictively, without being set off by commas:

*My brother **Michael** is six years old.*

In this case, the appositive *Michael* is providing information that is essential for narrowing down which brother the writer is telling us about. We can infer that they have multiple brothers, and understand that it is the one named Michael who is six years old.

Nouns as modifiers

Sometimes, nouns can be used to modify other nouns, functioning like adjectives. When they do this, they are often called **attributive nouns.** .

*He is a **speed** demon.*

Speed is normally a noun, but here it is acting as an adjective to modify *demon*.