

## Nouns: The Basics

**What are nouns?** Nouns are commonly defined as people, places, or things. They address the “who” and/or “what” of a sentence.

- The most reliable sign that a given word is a noun is if it follows an article like “the” or “a.”  
Examples: “The *world*” or “a *vampire*”
- Nouns can also follow possessives or numbers.  
Example: There are four *pillows* on my *bed*.
- Often, a word we typically think of as an adjective can also function as a noun.  
Examples: We are going to paint our walls *blue*. (Here, *blue* is an adjective.)  
The darker *blue* is closer to what we want. (Here, *blue* is a noun.)  
There are so many pretty *blues* in that photograph. (Here, *blue* is a noun, and it is pluralized.)
- Most adjectives, however, cannot function as nouns.  
Example: Do not say, “You are an *angry*.” We could say, “You are an *angry* person” or “You are *angry*,” but *angry* cannot function as a noun.
- Not all nouns are concrete objects. Some nouns are abstract.  
Example: I will not have my *authority* questioned. *Authority* is considered an abstract noun because it is not a tangible object. It is an idea.

An easy way to tell whether or not a word is a noun is to create a frame sentence.

Example: (The/possessive) \_\_\_\_\_ seem(s) all right.

- The article “the” appears in parentheses because the noun may or may not follow an article.
- A noun could also follow a possessive like his, her, my, or our.
- The noun also may or may not be plural. Therefore, depending on its plurality, *seem* or *seems* may follow the noun.  
Examples: The *explosion* seems all right.  
                  The *phones* seem all right.  
                  *Guacamole* seems all right.  
                  His *guitar* seems all right.
- If a word makes sense in this frame sentence, it is almost always a noun.

There are, of course, exceptions to the frame-sentence rule.

- Some verbs fit into the frame sentence, but share no other noun characteristics.  
Example: *Editing* seems all right.
- A word like *editing* is considered a gerund – a verb that can sometimes function as a noun.

Some nouns are created by modifying an adjective like fluent (fluency) or a verb like write (writer).

Example: His *fluency* makes him a good *writer*.

Most nouns can become plural (tigers) or possessive (tiger's).

Examples: There are twenty-seven *tigers* at the zoo. Don't enter the *tiger's* cage.

- Some nouns, like *fish* or *sheep*, cannot be made plural. Generally, these are nouns which cannot be counted.

Examples: Do not say, "There are fifty-two *sands* in my shoe." *Sand* cannot be counted.

Do not say, "There are a lot of *fishes* in the aquarium." *Fish* is the plural form. Its plurality is dependent upon context.

- In order to count one of the aforementioned nouns, it has to be modified with a countable noun.

Example: I am looking to sell eighteen *pieces* of *furniture*. *Pieces* is countable.

### Exercises:

Identify the noun(s) in the following sentences. Use the frame sentence if you have trouble.

- 1) His truancy led to his detainment.
- 2) How many students are in the class?
- 3) I was on a game show, and I won two pieces of luggage!
- 4) Are you afraid of the dark?
- 5) He is a shortsighted, imbecilic, donkey-eyed, infantile hillbilly.
- 6) Blame it on the chancellor.
- 7) His paper contains forty-two nouns.
- 8) A majority of citizens voted against the law.

Identify whether the italicized word is functioning as a verb or as a gerund.

- 9) I am *sweating* like a pig.
- 10) His *pedaling* is very impressive.
- 11) *Running* is just too much fun to turn down.
- 12) I am *giving* up cheese in order to lose weight.

Answers: 1) truancy, detainment 2) students, class 3) game show, pieces, luggage 4) dark 5) hillbilly 6) chancellor 7) paper, nouns 8) majority, citizens, law 9) verb 10) gerund (note the possessive) 11) gerund 12) verb

### Reference:

Klammer, Thomas P., Muriel R. Schulz, and Angela Della Volpe. *Analyzing English Grammar*.

6<sup>th</sup> ed. San Francisco: Longman, 2010.