

Nouns: Expert

Students who are new to college-level writing often struggle to be specific and descriptive. This handout is intended to help students, especially non-native speakers of English, improve their writing by using a wider variety of noun structures, including gerunds, infinitives, and noun clauses. Becoming comfortable with these structures will give you a greater range of options for discussing difficult or complex topics. It will also help you to combine related ideas into a single sentence. If you don't understand some of the terms and concepts in this handout, please refer to our Homegrown Handouts on "Nouns: The Basics," "Nouns: Advanced," and "Transitive and Intransitive Verbs."

How We Name Things

As you probably know, a **noun** is a word that names a person, place, thing, or idea. *Firefighter*, *Zimbabwe*, *balloon*, and *love* are examples of nouns. However, we sometimes need to find a name for more complex ideas than just "balloon" or "firefighter." What if we want to refer to a specific balloon or describe the firefighter's appearance in some way? Then we might need to use more than a **simple noun** like "balloon": we might need to use a **noun phrase**—a group of words made up of a noun and the words that modify or describe it.

Simple noun: balloon
Noun phrase: my brother's balloon

Simple noun: firefighter
Noun phrase: the beautiful firefighter

How We Name Action

Sometimes we need to express even more complicated ideas. How do you name an action, for example? We know that actions are contained in **verbs**, but sometimes we want to talk about the action itself instead of talking about somebody *doing* the action. We have three options for naming actions: nouns ending in *-ion* or *-ment*, infinitives, and gerunds.

Making a Verb a Noun

The suffixes *-ion* and *-ment* turn verbs into nouns. For example, if we add it to the verb "resign" we get the noun "resignation," which describes the result of having resigned. Sometimes there will also be a change to the last syllable of the verb: the *-ion* form of "consume" is "consumption." The *-ment* suffix works the same way. If we add *-ment* to the verb "judge," we get the noun "judgment," which is the result of having judged something. Unfortunately, not all verbs can be combined with the *-ion* or *-ment* suffixes, but most verbs with Latin roots will have an *-ion* form.

Making a Verb into a Noun Structure

It may surprise you to learn that verbs can name as well as nouns can. Both infinitives and gerunds are made from verbs even though they act like nouns. An **infinitive** almost always consists of the word “to” plus the base form of the verb—the form without any endings. For example, “to run,” “to pop,” “to be,” and “to consume” are all infinitives.

Gerund is the name for the *-ing* form of a verb when it is used as a noun. “Running,” “popping,” “being,” and “consuming” are all gerunds.

Just like other noun structures, gerunds and infinitives can be modified or described. Unlike other nouns, infinitives and gerunds can have noun structures as objects just like verbs do. Let’s look at some examples of how infinitives and gerunds can help you express a wider range of meaning than just using simple nouns or noun phrases.

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| 1. The beautiful firefighter | runs | in the park. | |
| <i>[Noun phrase]</i> | <i>[verb]</i> | <i>[preposition + noun phrase = prepositional phrase]</i> | |
| 2. The beautiful firefighter | likes | to run | in the park. |
| <i>[Noun phrase]</i> | <i>[verb]</i> | <i>[infinitive]</i> | <i>[prepositional phrase]</i> |
| 3. Running in the park | is | the beautiful firefighter’s favorite hobby. | |
| <i>[Gerund + prepositional phrase]</i> | <i>[verb]</i> | <i>[noun phrase]</i> | |
| 4. The firefighter | needs | to stretch her leg muscles | before running. |
| <i>[Noun phrase]</i> | <i>[verb]</i> | <i>[infinitive + noun phrase]</i> | <i>[preposition + gerund]</i> |

Choosing the Best Option

In general, nouns ending in *-ion* or *-ment* are best for talking about the result of an action; gerunds are best for talking about an action in process, and infinitives are best for talking about a potential action. Compare the differences in the following versions of the same sentence.

Oil consumption is a serious problem in the United States. *[noun ending in -ion]*

Consuming oil is a serious problem in the United States. *[gerund]*

To consume oil is a serious problem in the United States. *[infinitive]*

How We Name Ideas

The last noun structure is more complicated. It is the result of naming a whole sentence as an idea. This is called a **noun clause**. It is a **clause** because it contains its own subject and verb. It is a *noun* clause because it takes the place of a single noun in a sentence.

Noun clauses begin with the word “that” or with a question word. The question words include “who,” “what,” “when,” “why,” “how,” and a few others.

Let's look at an example that shows how we can turn a whole sentence into a noun. First, we'll take two sentences about a person whose identity we don't know—let's call him or her X.

Sentence 1: X popped my brother's balloon.

Sentence 2: X needs to apologize to him.

Now, let's combine these two sentences using a noun clause. The first step is to replace the X in Sentence 1 with a question word—in this case, "whoever" will work best. Sentence 1 is now a noun clause.

Step 1: X popped my brother's balloon. → Whoever popped my brother's balloon
[sentence] *[noun clause]*

Then, we can replace the X in Sentence 2 with our new noun clause and make one new sentence that combines both ideas.

Step 2: X needs to apologize to him. → Whoever popped my brother's balloon needs to apologize to him.

As you can see, the type of noun clause that uses question words is effective when you need to talk about unknown information. It lets you name an entire sentence-length concept—the concept of the person who popped my brother's balloon—and use it in another sentence.

The other type of noun clause, the type that uses the word "that," is most often used with verbs of thinking, wishing, feeling, or speaking, such as "imagine," "hope," "love," or "say." Let's look at two more sentences. (In this case, X stands for what the firefighter said.)

Sentence 1: The firefighter said X.

Sentence 2: None of her friends likes to run.

If we want to combine these sentences, we need to start by turning Sentence 2 into a noun clause. We can do that by putting "that" in front of it.

Step 1: None of her friends likes to run. → that none of her friends likes to run
[sentence] *[noun clause]*

Then, we replace the X in Sentence 1 with our new noun clause.

Step 2: The firefighter said X. → The firefighter said that none of her friends likes to run.

The “that” clause lets us report what people think, wish, feel, or say. This kind of noun structure is used so often that we sometimes leave out the word “that” because we can understand the sentence without it. You have probably seen many sentences just like the following examples, but you may not have known that there was a hidden “that” in them.

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|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. She said she didn’t want to go. | = | She said <i>that</i> she didn’t want to go. |
| 2. I wish I could sleep until noon. | = | I wish <i>that</i> I could sleep until noon. |

Activity 1: Identifying Noun Structures

Locate all of the noun structures in the following passage. (You can skip the pronouns, such as “I” and “me.”) Identify each noun structure as a simple noun, noun phrase, infinitive, gerund, or noun clause. Notice the different roles these noun structures play in the sentence.

I like to bake pie because baking relaxes me. Baking helps me to stop worrying about the stressors in my life and focus on what is happening right now. I love the squishing of pastry between my fingers and the bubbling of fruit pie in the oven. I especially like to bake for the holidays. Making pie is what puts me in the right spirit to celebrate Thanksgiving. My friends always hope I will show up with pie at every party.

Answer Key for Activity 1

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| 1. “to bake” : infinitive | 17. “to bake” : infinitive |
| 2. “pie” : simple noun | 18. “the holidays” : noun phrase |
| 3. “baking” : gerund | 19. “Making” : gerund |
| 4. “Baking” : gerund | 20. “pie” : simple noun |
| 5. “to stop” : infinitive | 21. “what puts me in the right spirit to celebrate Thanksgiving” : noun clause |
| 6. “worrying” : gerund | 22. “the right spirit” : noun phrase |
| 7. “the stressors” : noun phrase | 23. “to celebrate” : infinitive |
| 8. “my life” : noun phrase | 24. “Thanksgiving” : simple noun |
| 9. “to focus” : infinitive | 25. “My friends” : noun phrase |
| 10. “what is happening right now” : noun clause | 26. “I will show up with pie at every party” : noun clause. Look out for the missing “that” with verbs of thinking, wishing, feeling, or speaking. In this case, “hope” is a verb of wishing. |
| 11. “the squishing” : gerund phrase | 27. “pie” : simple noun |
| 12. “pastry” : simple noun | 28. “every party” : noun phrase |
| 13. “my fingers” : noun phrase | |
| 14. “the bubbling” : gerund phrase | |
| 15. “fruit pie” : noun phrase | |
| 16. “the oven” : noun phrase | |

Activity 2: Using Noun Structures

For each of the following sentences, write four new versions in which you replace the X with a simple noun or noun phrase, a gerund, an infinitive, and a noun clause. Not all of the noun structures will fit into all the sentences. There will be many right answers—use your imagination!

1. I like X.
2. The man spoke about X.
3. The students wanted X.
4. The expert said X.
5. X like ice cream.
6. I stayed home last night because of X.
7. X is responsible for the damage to company property.
8. The company needs X.

Answer Key for Activity 2

These are not the *only* right answers—they are examples of *possible* right answers.

1. I like pizza. I like fresh, hot New York-style pizza. I like eating fresh, hot New York-style pizza. I like to eat fresh, hot New York-style pizza. I like that my girlfriend buys me fresh, hot New York-style pizza on Fridays.
2. The man spoke about debt. The man spoke about the national debt. The man spoke about reducing the national debt. The man spoke about reduction of national debt.
3. The students wanted rest. The students wanted a lot of rest. The students wanted to rest a lot after their exams.
4. The expert imagined unpleasantness. The expert imagined unpleasant things. The expert imagined the clicking of spiders. The expert imagined what unpleasant things the clicking of spiders might lead to.
5. Cats like ice cream. Happy cats like ice cream. Whichever cats are happy like ice cream.
6. I stayed home last night because of storms. I stayed home last night because of nasty storms. I stayed home last night because of the thundering. I stayed home last night because of whichever tropical storm came through thundering.
7. Someone is responsible for the damage to company property. Someone terrible is responsible for the damage to company property. Whoever is responsible for the damage to company property is terrible.
8. The company needs employees. The company needs several new employees. The company needs to hire several new employees. The company needs whatever new employees it can find.