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: