Nouns: The Basics

What Are Nouns?
Nouns are commonly defined as people, places, or things. They address the "who" 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 is round.  
I saw a vampire last night.

Nouns can also follow possessives or numbers.

Examples:  

There are four pillows on my bed.  
Our car was stolen.

Occasionally, 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 the photo. (Here, blue is a noun, and it takes the plural form.)

Many adjectives, however, cannot function as nouns.

Examples:  

You can never correctly say, “You are an angry.”  
We could say, “You are an angry person,” or “You are angry,” but angry itself cannot function as a noun.

Not all nouns are concrete objects. Some nouns are abstract.

Examples:  

I will not have my authority questioned.  
My goals are lofty.  
(Authority and goals are abstract nouns because they are not tangible objects: they are ideas.)

How Do I Determine if a Word Is a Noun?
An easy way to tell whether or not a word is a noun is to use a frame sentence to test the word.

(A/An/The) ____________ seem(s) all right.

Examples:  

The table seems all right.  
Tables seem all right.
• The articles “a/an/the” appear in parentheses in the frame sentence because the noun may or may not follow an article.
• The noun also may or may not be plural. Therefore, depending on its plurality, seem or seems may follow the noun.
• If a word makes sense in this frame sentence, it is almost always a noun.

There are, of course, some exceptions to the frame-sentence rule. Some nouns 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 is functioning as a noun. Note that editing is the subject of this sample sentence.)

Some nouns are created by modifying an adjective like fluent (which can become the noun fluency) or a verb like write (which can become the noun writer).

Example: Her fluency makes her a good writer.

Most nouns can become plural or possessive.

Example: There are twenty-seven tigers at the zoo. Don’t enter that tiger’s cage.

Some nouns, like water or sand, cannot be made plural. Generally, these are nouns that cannot be counted.

Example: You can never correctly say, “There are fifty-two sands in my shoe.”
(Sand is a non-count noun, and it cannot be made plural.)

To transform a non-count noun into a count noun, it has to be modified.

Example: I am looking to sell eighteen pieces of furniture.
(Furniture is a non-count noun; however, the noun pieces is countable.)

Activity
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 to lose weight.

**Answer Key for Activity**
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 his*)
11) gerund
12) verb

**References**