

Thousands of Words

Lesson 1

Parts of Speech

Every language is made up of many thousands of words. Linguists estimate that there are over 500,000 words in the English language, and more are added constantly. New words come from many sources. Some examples of sources are technology (*blog, email, website*) and other languages (*a la mode, perestroika*).

Parts of Speech

Because certain words have characteristics in common with other words, we can sort groups of words into categories. Another word for these categories is *parts of speech*. Take the words *lemon, giraffe, and stapler* for example. **They have one feature in common; if you add an -s to each word, it becomes plural.**

Singular Plural

giraffe giraffes

lemon lemons

stapler staplers

Nouns

Singular Plural

giraffe giraffes

lemon lemons

stapler staplers

These words also have several other features in common, and these words are in a category called *nouns*.

Nouns v. Other Parts of Speech

Other words don't share the same characteristics and, therefore, belong in different categories, such as *verbs* or *adjectives*. Nouns are different from verbs, for example, in that verbs are actions that people or things do. So, if you say that your dog barks, the *dog* is a noun and what she does, *barks*, is a verb. Nouns are different from adjectives, which are words in sentences that describe nouns. If you say that you have a confident dog, *confident* is the

adjective that describes the noun *dog*. We'll discuss some other features of nouns later in this lesson so that you will understand how to identify them. In lessons 2 and 3 we talk about verbs, adjectives, and other parts of speech.

Real and Imaginary Nouns

REAL AND IMAGINARY NOUNS

You may have already learned in school that **nouns are people, places or things**. That much is easy to understand, but nouns are more exciting and more complicated than that. First, the people can be real (**Lance Armstrong**) or fictional (**Sherlock Holmes**). The places can also be real (**California**) or imaginary (**Hogwarts**). When nouns are things, the issue gets even more complicated. There are real things (**cars**), imaginary things (**dragons**), and things that some people think are real and some people think are imaginary (**angels**).

Exercise 1: Real and Imaginary Nouns

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

Count and Non-Count Nouns

Count and Non-Count Nouns

Besides real-vs.-imaginary, there are other interesting ways that nouns differ. One difference that you know but may never have thought about, is the difference between **count** nouns and **non-count** nouns. This difference is very important to understand since count nouns and non-count nouns behave differently in a sentence.

Count Nouns

In English, we count some things one by one:

three envelopes



four pencils



Non-Count Nouns

We count other things indirectly, by way of measuring words.



Countable Measuring Words



An example of a **non-count noun** is *rice*. When we say the word *rice*, we are actually referring to a pile of individual grains of rice. We can't say *three rices*. In order to talk about rice in the plural, we have to use a measuring or counting word. For *rice* one measuring word is *grains*. We could say, "*There are only five grains of rice on my plate.*"

Can you think of other non-count nouns that we count with the word *grains*?

Identify the Kinds of Nouns

Since grains of rice are small we also count rice in larger units. A recipe, for example, could call for two *cups of rice*. At the dinner table, you might ask for two *spoonfuls of rice*.

Question: What kind of nouns are the words *grain*, *cup*, and *spoonful*?

Answer: What Kind of Nouns

Answer: If you answered *count nouns*, you are correct.

Notice that you must add a countable measuring word in order to count non-count nouns:

two	cartons of	milk
<i>count noun</i>	<i>measuring word</i>	<i>Non-count noun</i>
a	teaspoon of	salt
<i>count noun</i>	<i>measuring word</i>	<i>Non-count noun</i>

Count Noun Examples

Here are some more examples of both kinds of nouns:

Count Nouns

Cupcakes (You can count them individually. You can say I ate three cupcakes.)



Chairs (You can say: There are three chairs in my office.)



You can count pens and marbles and quarters and cell phones, etc.



Non-Count Noun Examples

Non-Count Nouns



Water

You can't count water. You can't say: I drank three waters. You have to say I drank three glasses or gallons of water.



Oxygen

You could count the containers that oxygen comes in, but you can't count oxygen, or any other gasses, themselves.



Furniture

Furniture is a general category of similar items. You can't count the category *furnitures*, but you can count items in the category, the pieces of furniture, such as chairs or tables.

Grammar Note: Comparing Quantities

Grammar note

People commonly make errors when using a modifying (description) word to indicate the amount of count and non-count nouns. For example, some people make mistakes using the words *less* and *fewer*. We use the word *less* with non-count nouns and *fewer* with count nouns. For example, we would say I have *less rice* (a non-count noun) than she does, but *fewer pencils* (count noun). Here are some more examples of modifiers that are often confused:

	count	non-count
fewer vs. less	<i>I ate fewer cookies than you did.</i>	<i>You ate less ice cream than I did .</i>
number of vs. amount of	<i>The number of women in engineering is increasing.</i>	<i>This career requires a large amount of education</i>
many vs.	<i>Mom didn't make many</i>	<i>She didn't feel much anger</i>

much *mistakes.* *even though the situation was unfair.*

few vs. little *Few cats enjoy water.* *Little water flows through the desert.*

Exercise 2 - Identifying Count and Non-Count Nouns

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

Exercise 3: Counting Non-Count Nouns

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

Tangible and Intangible Nouns

Nouns also differ in whether they are concrete or abstract. Another word for concrete is *tangible*; another word for abstract is *intangible*. On the next page is an explanation of the two types, with examples.

Tangible (Concrete) Nouns

If something is *tangible*, you can touch or feel it. (The word *tangible* comes from the Latin word *tangere* which means to touch.) *Concrete* is another word we use to describe tangible nouns. There are thousands of concrete nouns.

Here are just a few. Notice that you could draw a picture of each one.

Briefcase Poodle
Rock Dictionary
Peanut Toothpaste
Computer Tutu

Intangible (Abstract Nouns)

Some nouns are abstract, or intangible. They describe ideas, thoughts, feelings, or concepts, but these ideas are not physical things that you can touch, like a briefcase or a kangaroo (if you can catch one.)

So, a word like *love* is a feeling (*intangible*) whereas a *heart* (*tangible*) can be touched and repaired by a surgeon. *Justice*, is a concept (*intangible*) around which laws or a *constitution* (*tangible*) can be based. You can see the original copy of the Constitution of the United States of America at the National Archives. A word like *wealth* is an idea (*intangible*.) You can't touch, see, or draw a picture of wealth. You can, however, touch, see, or draw a picture of many of the things that show wealth. *Mansions* and *yachts* are *tangible* nouns.

Here are just some of the many abstract nouns in English

Justice	Health
Wealth	Fear
Love	Sympathy
Government	Joy

Exercise 4: Abstract and Concrete Nouns

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

WHAT IS A NOUN?

How can you tell if a word is acting like a noun? Most of us have heard the person, place, or thing definition, but that definition is somewhat simplistic and unreliable. For example, *thing* is a very general word; what constitutes a *thing*? Are *love* and *antipathy* things? Some people would say yes, but *love* and *antipathy* aren't things that can be touched or seen. But as we just learned, not every noun can be touched or seen. Some are *intangible*.

Are These Nouns?

Even if we agree that *love* is a thing, is it a noun in both sentences below?

Love makes the world go round.

I *love* marsupials.

Answer: Noun versus Verb

If you answered *no*, you are correct. Love is a noun in the first sentence, but it's a verb in the second sentence.

Noun versus Adjective

Let's look at a second example. We can all agree that *stone* is a tangible thing. We all have touched stones and can picture stones in our heads. However, is *stone* a noun in the following sentences?

The *stone* in my shoe gave me a blister.

We live in a *stone* house.

In the first example, *stone* is a **noun**, but in the second, *stone* is an **adjective** describing house.

A Better Definition

We need a better definition!

Noun Tests

One way to develop a better definition is to study the way a word is used in a sentence and see how that word works with other words around it. For example, one feature of nouns is that they can follow *articles* (*a, an, the*) or *quantity words* like *some, many, several, few, twenty*.

To determine whether a word is a noun, you can put it through a series of tests to see if the word has noun features. Let's try a few noun tests now.

Noun Test 1: Articles

Test 1:

Rule: Nouns can directly follow articles (*a, an, the*) or quantity words (*some, a lot, ten*).

The + _____
article *noun*

Some + _____

quantity word *noun*

Test 1 Examples

Let's try plugging a few words in and see if they work:

1. A stone is hard. *grammatical*
article ?
2. Some rice would taste great right now. *grammatical*
quantity word ?
3. The love my dog gives me is unconditional. *grammatical*
article ?
4. The seriously is good. *ungrammatical*
article ?

The first three words are grammatical following an article or quantity word . They make sense in that construction; therefore, *stone, rice, and love* pass the first noun test. However, the fourth word, *seriously*, does not make sense following an article. It fails Noun Test 1.

Noun Test 2: Adjective + Noun

Test 2:

Rule: Nouns can fit into a pattern of Article + Adjective + Noun

The gigantic _____
article *adjective* ?

Test 2 Examples

Let's try our four words *stone, rice, love, and seriously* with Test 2:

1. A spotted stone is hard. *grammatical*
article *adjective* *noun*
2. Some wild rice would taste great right now. *grammatical*
quantity word *adjective* *noun*
3. The generous love my dog gives me is unconditional. *grammatical*
article *adjective* *noun*

4. The *squishy* seriously is good *ungrammatical*
article *adjective* ?

Again, Examples 1, 2, and 3, are grammatical (though perhaps a bit wordy), which means that our three words *stone, rice, and love* have passed test 2. However, Example 4 is clearly ungrammatical. Thus, the word *seriously* fails another noun test.

Noun Test 3: Plurals

Test 3:

Rule: Nouns can be made plural.

One last test that works **most of the time*** is checking the plural form. Most nouns have plural forms . You can indicate the amount. Most count nouns can be made plural by adding an *-s* or *-es*.

* This test is not as foolproof as the others, however, because English has many words that don't fit into regular patterns. Some of these words are borrowed from other languages and use a plural from the original language (such as *datum* (sing.) / *data* (plural)). Other irregular plural forms are a holdover from old English *tooth* (sing.) / *teeth* (plural).

Test 3 Examples

As we discussed earlier, non-count nouns don't have an *-s* or *-es* plural form, but you can still indicate amount by adding a measuring word such as *some* or *a lot*. To test whether a word is a noun, try fitting it into one of the following patterns:

Group A - Count nouns

- I had two _____ -s/- es .
1. I had two stones. *grammatical*
 ? + s
 2. I had two dresses. *grammatical*
 ? + s
 3. I had two seriously. *ungrammatical*
 ? + s

Sentences A and B are grammatical, but sentence C is not . Thus, *stones* and *dresses* pass Noun Test 3, but *seriously* does not.

Group B - Non-count nouns

She had a lot of _____.

- | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1. She had | <i>some</i> | <u>rice</u> . | <i>grammatical</i> |
| | <i>measuring word</i> | ? | |
| 2. She had | <i>a lot of</i> | <u>love</u> . | <i>grammatical</i> |
| | <i>measuring word</i> | ? | |
| 3. She had | <i>a lot of</i> | <u>seriously</u> . | <i>ungrammatical</i> |
| | <i>measuring word</i> | ? | |

The first two examples work. Thus *rice* and *love* pass the third noun test. However, again, *seriously* doesn't make sense, so it fails Noun Test 3.

Exercise 5: Noun Tests

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

Changeable Nouns

Words that Belong to More than One Category

We have already seen that some words can be a noun in one sentence, but a different part of speech in another. This changeability (also called *mutability*) is very common in English. There are, however, some words that are always nouns, no matter what the sentence is. Examples of words that are always nouns are *thermometer* and *tyrannosaurus*.

Some suffixes (endings added to a base word) belong only to the noun category and can provide clues that a certain word is a noun. Some examples of these noun suffixes are

- | | |
|--------|---|
| - ment | <i>punishment</i>
<i>supplement</i> |
| -ion | <i>information</i>
<i>proclamation</i> |
| - er | <i>worker</i>
<i>teacher</i> |

Context and Placement

However, many words can be used in different ways depending on the context and placement in the sentence. Here are some examples of words that can be used as both nouns and other parts of speech.

Rock

My geology teacher told every student to bring a rock to class. (noun)

Don't rock the boat. (verb)

Fair

I like seeing the animals at the county fair. (noun)

I think the principal made a fair decision. (adjective)

Insult

I didn't appreciate your insult. (noun)

Don't insult me like that. (verb)

(Say these last two sentences . You will notice that the accent is on a different part of the word. For INSult , the noun, you accent the first syllable of the word . For inSULT , the verb , you accent the second syllable.)

Exercise 6: Changeable Nouns

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

Noun Specificity

Specificity

Using the best noun is important for good writing. For example, here is a grammatically correct sentence that is very uninformative.

Our family has an animal.

Our family has an animal.

Our family has an animal.

This sentence follows the rules of grammar. It is a complete sentence, but how many different meanings could this sentence have? Let's look at some alternative sentences. *Animal* is such a non-specific noun that we know very little. We know from our

knowledge of the world that most families that have animals keep them as pets, but this is not always the case. Some families might have farm animals or even a wild mouse hiding in the basement. The sentence doesn't tell us.

Our family has a pet

Our family has a pet.

This sentence is a little more specific. Now we know that the family has a pet, but it could be a fish, a lizard, a turtle, a dog, a rabbit, a cat, or something more exotic. The sentence is still very uninformative.

Our family has a mammal

Our family has a mammal.

This sentence is also uninformative. Now we can eliminate fish and lizards, but we no longer know if the mammal is a pet.

Our family has a dog

Our family has a dog.

This sentence is better. We know the type of animal, and since we know that dogs are pets, we have more information than any of the other sentences even though the sentence is no longer than any of the others.

Our family has a Malamute

Our family has a Malamute.

This is the most specific yet. We not only know that the family has a dog, but also the kind of dog. Again, this sentence is no longer than any of the others but gives the most information. In most situations, this would be the best sentence.

However, if you were speaking or writing to someone with very little knowledge of dogs, the hearer might not know that a Malamute was a kind of dog. In that case, the information about Malamutes being dogs would have to be provided either by making the sentence longer or in another sentence.

Writer's Tip: Level of Specificity

Writer's Tip:

Your level of specificity should depend on your audience's previous knowledge.

Audience already familiar with dogs.

Least Specific Noun				Most Specific Noun
animal				
	pet			
		mammal		
			dog	
				Malamute

Audience not familiar with dogs.

Least Specific Noun			Most Specific Noun
animal			
	pet		
		mammal	
			dog

Exercise 7: Specific Nouns

Note: Many of the exercises in this course are interactive and self-correcting. Students need to be online to complete these exercises. Instructors then check to see how each student has performed and what issues might need further clarification.

Lesson 1 FWA

FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

SPECIFICITY AND AUDIENCE DESIGN

Imagine that you call a friend on your cell phone. Your friend asks where you are, and you answer, "Here." Since she asked you, your friend doesn't know where "here" is. You haven't given her (your audience) enough information.

Your assignment is to replace "here" with specific nouns that would come after the words *at*, *in*, or *in the*. *At work* would be an appropriate response if your friend was checking to see if you were on your way home or not. *In Baltimore* could be appropriate if your friend knew you would be traveling to different cities during the day. *In the kitchen* would be an appropriate response if your friend already knew you were home and wanted to know what you were doing.

Your friend's "Where are you?" means that she wants some information about your location. She would, however, already know something. The noun you need to use in your response has to match the knowledge that your friend has about you and where you might be. Here's your assignment. It has two parts.

- A. First, state briefly where you are (you can imagine that you're in a different place than you really are if you want), and then list 5 different replacement answers for "here" and the audiences and situations that would make them appropriate. **The 5 replacements must all be for the same, single location.**

Example: I'm in Baltimore buying popcorn at the Senator Theater on York Road. My cell phone rings and someone says, "Where are you?"

Response	Audience Situation	
<i>1. I'm home in Baltimore</i>	<i>aunt</i>	<i>wondering if I'm back from summer camp yet</i>
<i>2. Buying popcorn</i>	<i>best friend</i>	<i>he's meeting me at the movie theater</i>
<i>3. The Senator Theater on York Road</i>	<i>stranger</i>	<i>asking, "Where am I?"</i>

- B. Next, pick one of your responses and write a paragraph about that place, to someone who has never seen it, using as many nouns as possible.

Interesting Noun Fact

Nouns are the most common part of speech in the English language. Linguists have estimated that the average college freshman knows 20,000 nouns.