

## Nouns

Nouns are commonly thought of as "naming" words, and specifically as the names of "people, places, or things". Nouns such as *John*, *London*, and *computer* certainly fit this description, but the class of nouns is much broader than this. Nouns also denote abstract and intangible concepts such as *birth*, *happiness*, *evolution*, *technology*, *management*, *imagination*, *revenge*, *politics*, *hope*, *cookery*, *sport*, *literacy*.... Because of this enormous diversity of reference, it is not very useful to study nouns solely in terms of their meaning. It is much more fruitful to consider them from the point of view of their formal characteristics.

## Characteristics of Nouns

Many nouns can be recognised by their endings. Typical noun endings include:

<b>-er/-or</b>	<i>actor, painter, plumber, writer</i>
<b>-ism</b>	<i>criticism, egotism, magnetism, vandalism</i>
<b>-ist</b>	<i>artist, capitalist, journalist, scientist</i>
<b>-ment</b>	<i>arrangement, development, establishment, government</i>
<b>-tion</b>	<i>foundation, organisation, recognition, supposition</i>

Most nouns have distinctive SINGULAR and PLURAL forms. The plural of regular nouns is formed by adding -s to the singular:

Singular	Plural
<i>car</i>	<i>cars</i>
<i>dog</i>	<i>dogs</i>
<i>house</i>	<i>houses</i>

However, there are many irregular nouns which do not form the plural in this way:

Singular	Plural
<i>man</i>	<i>men</i>
<i>child</i>	<i>children</i>
<i>sheep</i>	<i>sheep</i>

The distinction between singular and plural is known as NUMBER CONTRAST.

We can recognise many nouns because they often have *the*, *a*, or *an* in front of them:

the *car*  
an *artist*  
a *surprise*  
the *egg*  
a *review*

These words are called determiners, which is the next word class we will look at. Nouns may take an -'s ("apostrophe s") or GENITIVE MARKER to indicate possession:

the *boy's* pen  
a *spider's* web  
my *girlfriend's* brother  
*John's* house

If the noun already has an -s ending to mark the plural, then the genitive marker appears only as an apostrophe after the plural form:

the *boys'* pens  
the *spiders'* webs  
the *Browns'* house

The genitive marker should not be confused with the 's form of contracted verbs, as in *John's a good boy* (= John *is* a good boy).

Nouns often co-occur without a genitive marker between them:

*rally car*  
*table top*  
*cheese grater*  
*University entrance examination*

We will look at these in more detail later, when we discuss noun phrases.

## Common and Proper Nouns

Nouns which name specific people or places are known as PROPER NOUNS.

*John*  
*Mary*  
*London*  
*France*

Many names consist of more than one word:

*John Wesley*  
*Queen Mary*  
*South Africa*  
*Atlantic Ocean*  
*Buckingham Palace*

Proper nouns may also refer to times or to dates in the calendar:

*January, February, Monday, Tuesday, Christmas, Thanksgiving*

All other nouns are COMMON NOUNS.

Since proper nouns usually refer to something or someone unique, they do not normally take plurals. However, they may do so, especially when number is being specifically referred to:

there are three *Davids* in my class  
we met two *Christmases* ago

For the same reason, names of people and places are not normally preceded by determiners *the* or *a/an*, though they can be in certain circumstances:

it's nothing like the *America* I remember  
my brother is an *Einstein* at maths

Identify all the nouns in the following extract.

The major thoroughfares were already lit by the new gas, but this was not the bright and even glare of the late Victorian period: the light flared and diminished, casting a flickering light across the streets and lending to the houses and pedestrians a faintly unreal or even theatrical quality.

The nouns in the extract are:

They are all common nouns. The word *Victorian* might appear at first sight to be a proper noun, because it is capitalized. But notice that it cannot take a plural -s ending (*\*the late Victorians period*). In this sentence, it is an adjective modifying the noun *period*, and it is capitalized because it comes from the proper noun *Victoria*. In other contexts, of course, it could be used as a proper noun, as in *Gladstone was an eminent Victorian, I'm reading about the Victorians*.

## Count and Non-count Nouns

Common nouns are either count or non-count. COUNT nouns can be "counted", as follows:

one pen, two pens, three pens, four pens...

NON-COUNT nouns, on the other hand, cannot be counted in this way:

one software, \*two softwares, \*three softwares, \*four softwares...

From the point of view of grammar, this means that count nouns have singular as well as plural forms, whereas non-count nouns have only a singular form.

It also means that non-count nouns do not take *a/an* before them:

### Count

a pen

### Non-count

\*a software

In general, non-count nouns are considered to refer to indivisible wholes. For this reason, they are sometimes called MASS nouns.

Some common nouns may be either count or non-count, depending on the kind of reference they have (they combine the characteristics of count and non-count nouns). For example, in *I made a cake*, *cake* is a count noun, and the *a* before it indicates singular number. However, in *I like cake*, the reference is less specific. It refers to "cake in general", and so *cake* is non-count in this sentence. We can view *stone* as the non-count material constituting the entity *a stone* which can be picked up from a pile of stones and individually thrown.

It will be noticed that the categorization count and non-count cuts across the traditional distinction between 'abstract' (immaterial) nouns like *warmth*, and 'concrete' (tangible) nouns like *bottle*. But while abstract nouns may be count like *remark* or non-count like *warmth*, there is a considerable degree of overlap between abstract and non-count. This does not proceed from nature but is language specific, and we list some examples which are non-count in English but count nouns in some other languages:

Anger, applause, behaviour, chaos, chess, conduct, courage, dancing, education, harm, homework, hospitality, leisure, melancholy, moonlight, parking, photography, poetry, progress, publicity, research (as *in* do some research), resistance, safety, shopping, smoking, sunshine, violence, weather.

Nevertheless, when we turn to the large class of nouns, which can be both count and non-count, we see that there is often considerable difference in meaning involved and that this corresponds broadly to concreteness or particularization in the count usage and abstractness or generalization in the non-count usage. For example:

Count	Non-count
I've had many difficulties	He's not had much difficulty
He's had many odd experiences	This job requires experience
Buy an evening paper	Wrap the parcel in the brown paper
She was a beauty in the youth	She had beauty in the youth
The talks will take place in Paris	I dislike idle talk
There were bright lights and harsh sounds	Light travels faster than sound
The lambs were eating quietly	There is lamb on the menu

#### Note

Virtually all non-count nouns can be treated as count nouns when used in classificatory senses:

There are several French wines available (=kinds of wine)  
This is a bread I greatly enjoy (=kind of bread)

In each of the following sentences, indicate whether the highlighted noun is count or non-count.

1. The <b>board</b> will meet tomorrow to consider your application.	count
2. The <b>information</b> you gave to the detective was very misleading.	uncount
3. I thought it was a strange <b>comment</b> to make.	count
4. Smoking damages your <b>health</b> .	uncount
5. Jean is studying <b>music</b> at college.	uncount
6. I'll have a <b>brandy</b> , please.	count

## Review

Count nouns usually have different singular and plural forms. In the singular, they usually take *a/an* before them. So the count nouns in this exercise are: *board*, *comment*, and *brandy*.

Non-count nouns may be considered to refer to indivisible wholes. They do not normally have plural forms, or take *a/an*. The non-count nouns are *information*, *health*, and *music*.

## The Gender of Nouns

The gender of nouns plays an important role in the grammar of some languages. In French, for instance, a masculine noun can only take the masculine form of an adjective. If the noun is feminine, then it will take a different form of the same adjective - its feminine form.

In English, however, nouns are not in themselves masculine or feminine. They do not have grammatical gender, though they may refer to male or female people or animals:

the *waiter* is very prompt

~the *waitress* is very prompt

the *lion* roars at night

~the *lioness* roars at night

These distinctions in spelling reflect differences in sex, but they have no grammatical implications. For instance, we use the same form of an adjective whether we are referring to a waiter or to a waitress:

an efficient *waiter*

~an efficient *waitress*

Similarly, the natural distinctions reflected in such pairs as *brother/sister*, *nephew/niece*, and *king/queen* have no consequence for grammar. While they refer to specific sexes, these words are not masculine or feminine in themselves.

However, gender is significant in the choice of a personal pronoun to replace a noun:

*John* is late

~*He* is late

*Mary* is late

~*She* is late

Here the choice of pronoun is determined by the sex of the person being referred to. However, this distinction is lost in the plural:

*John* and *Mary* are late

~*They* are late

*John* and *David* are late

~*They* are late

*Mary* and *Jane* are late

~*They* are late

Gender differences are also manifested in possessive pronouns (*his/hers*) and in reflexive pronouns (*himself/herself*).

When the notion of sex does not apply -- when we refer to inanimate objects, for instance -- we use the pronoun *it*:

*the letter* arrived  
late

~*it* arrived  
late