The parts of speech

Traditional grammar classifies words based on eight **parts of speech**: the verb, the noun, the pronoun, the adjective, the adverb, the preposition, the conjunction, and the interjection.

Each **part of speech** explains not what the word *is*, but how the word *is used*. In fact, the same word can be a noun in one sentence and a verb or adjective in the next. The next few examples show how a word's part of speech can change from one sentence to the next, and following them is a series of sections on the individual parts of speech, followed by an exercise.

> **Books** are made of ink, paper, and glue.

In this sentence, "books" is a noun, the subject of the sentence.

> Deborah waits patiently while Bridget **books** the tickets.

Here "books" is a verb, and its subject is "Bridget."

> We **walk** down the street.

In this sentence, "walk" is a verb, and its subject is the pronoun "we."

> The mail carrier stood on the **walk**.

In this example, "walk" is a noun, which is part of a prepositional phrase describing where the mail carrier stood.

> The town decided to build a new **jail**.

Here "jail" is a noun, which is the object of the infinitive phrase "to build."

> The sheriff told us that if we did not leave town immediately he would **jail** us.

Here "jail" is part of the compound verb "would jail."

> They heard high pitched **cries** in the middle of the night.

In this sentence, "cries" is a noun acting as the direct object of the verb "heard."

> The baby **cries** all night long and all day long.

But here "cries" is a verb that describes the actions of the subject of the sentence, the baby.

The next few sections explain each of the parts of speech in detail. When you have finished, you might want to test yourself by trying the exercise.

What is a verb?

The verb is perhaps the most important part of the sentence. A **verb** or compound verb asserts something about the subject of the sentence and express actions, events, or states of being. The verb or compound verb is the critical element of the predicate of a sentence.

In each of the following sentences, the verb or compound verb is **highlighted**:

> Dracula **bites** his victims on the neck.

The verb "bites" describes the action Dracula takes.

> In early October, Giselle **will plant** twenty tulip bulbs.

Here the compound verb "will plant" describes an action that will take place in the future.

> My first teacher **was** Miss Crawford, but I remember the janitor Mr. Weatherbee more vividly.

In this sentence, the verb "was" (the simple past tense tense of "is") identifies a particular person and the verb "remember" describes a mental action.

> Karl Creelman bicycled around the world in 1899, but his diaries and his bicycle **were destroyed**.

In this sentence, the compound verb "were destroyed" describes an action which took place in the past.

What is a noun?

A **noun** is a word used to name a person, animal, place, thing, and abstract idea. Nouns are usually the first words which small children learn. The **highlighted** words in the following sentences are all nouns:

> Late last **year** our **neighbours** bought a **goat**.
> **Portia White** was an **opera singer**.
> The **bus inspector** looked at all the **passengers' passes**.
> According to **Plutarch**, the **library** at **Alexandria** was destroyed in 48 B.C.
> **Philosophy** is of little **comfort** to the **starving**.

A noun can function in a sentence as a subject, a direct object, an indirect object, a subject complement, an object complement, an appositive, an adjective or an adverb.

Noun Gender

Many common nouns, like "engineer" or "teacher," can refer to men or women. Once, many English nouns would change form depending on their gender -- for example, a man was called an "author" while a woman was called an "authoress" -- but this use of **gender-specific nouns** is very rare today. Those that are still used occasionally tend to refer to occupational categories, as in the following sentences.

> David Garrick was a very prominent eighteenth-century actor.
> Sarah Siddons was at the height of her career as an actress in the 1780s.
> The manager was trying to write a want ad, but he couldn't decide whether he was advertising for a "waiter" or a "waitress"

Noun Plurals

Most nouns change their form to indicate number by adding "-s" or "-es", as illustrated in the following pairs of sentences:

> When Matthew was small he rarely told the **truth** if he thought he was going to be punished.
> Many people do not believe that **truths** are self-evident.
> As they walked through the silent house, they were startled by an unexpected **echo**.
> I like to shout into the quarry and listen to the **echoes** that return.
> He tripped over a **box** left carelessly in the hallway.
> Since we are moving, we will need many **boxes**.

There are other nouns which form the plural by changing the last letter before adding "s". Some words ending in "f" form the plural by deleting "f" and adding "ves," and words ending in "y" form the plural by deleting the "y" and adding "ies," as in the following pairs of sentences:

> The harbour at Marble Mountain has one **wharf**.
> There are several **wharves** in Halifax Harbour.
> Warsaw is their favourite **city** because it reminds them of their courtship.
> The vacation my grandparents won includes trips to twelve European **cities**.
> The children circled around the headmaster and shouted, "Are you a **mouse** or a man?"
> The audience was shocked when all five men admitted that they were afraid of **mice**.

Other nouns form the plural irregularly. If English is your first language, you probably know most of these already: when in doubt, consult a good dictionary.

Possessive Nouns

In the possessive case, a noun or pronoun changes its form to show that it owns or is closely related to something else. Usually, nouns become possessive by adding a combination of an apostrophe and the letter "s."

You can form the possessive case of a singular noun that does not end in "s" by adding an apostrophe and "s," as in the following sentences:

> The red suitcase is **Cassandra's**.
> The only luggage that was lost was the **prime minister's**.
> The exhausted recruits were woken before dawn by the **drill sergeant's** screams.
> The **miner's** face was covered in coal dust.

You can form the possessive case of a singular noun that ends in "s" by adding an apostrophe alone or by adding an apostrophe and "s," as in the following examples:

> The **bus's** seats are very uncomfortable.
> The **bus'** seats are very uncomfortable.
> The film crew accidentally crushed the **platypus's** eggs.
> The film crew accidentally crushed the **platypus'** eggs.
> **Felicia Hemans's** poetry was once more popular than Lord Byron's.
> **Felicia Hemans'** poetry was once more popular than Lord Byron's.

You can form the possessive case of a plural noun that does not end in "s" by adding an apostrophe and a "s," as in the following examples:

> The **children's** mittens were scattered on the floor of the porch.
> The **sheep's** pen was mucked out every day.
> Since we have a complex appeal process, a **jury's** verdict is not always final.
> The **men's** hockey team will be playing as soon as the **women's** team is finished.
> The hunter followed the **moose's** trail all morning but lost it in the afternoon.

You can form the possessive case of a plural noun that *does* end in "s" by adding an apostrophe:

> The concert was interrupted by the **dogs'** barking,
> the **ducks'** quacking, and the **babies'** squalling.
> The **janitors'** room is downstairs and to the left.

My uncle spent many hours trying to locate the **squirrels'** nest.
The archivist quickly finished repairing the **diaries'** bindings.
Religion is usually the subject of the **roommates'** many late night
debates.

Using Possessive Nouns

When you read the following sentences, you will notice that a noun in the
possessive case frequently functions as an adjective modifying another
noun:

The **miner's** face was covered in coal dust.

Here the possessive noun "miner's" is used to modify the noun "face" and
together with the article "the," they make up the noun phrase that is the
sentence's subject.

The concert was interrupted by the **dogs'** barking,
the **ducks'** quacking, and the **babies'** squalling.

In this sentence, each possessive noun modifies a gerund. The possessive
noun "dogs'" modifies "barking," "ducks'" modifies "quacking," and
"babies'" modifies "squalling."

The film crew accidentally crushed the **platypus's** eggs.

In this example the possessive noun "platypus's" modifies the noun
"eggs" and the noun phrase "the platypus's eggs" is the direct object of
the verb "crushed."

My uncle spent many hours trying to locate the **squirrels'** nest.

In this sentence the possessive noun "squirrels'" is used to modify the
noun "nest" and the noun phrase "the squirrels' nest" is the object of the
infinitive phrase "to locate."

Types Of Nouns

There are many different types of nouns. As you know, you capitalise
some nouns, such as "Canada" or "Louise," and do not capitalise others,
such as "badger" or "tree" (unless they appear at the beginning of a
sentence). In fact, grammarians have developed a whole series of noun
types, including the proper noun, the common noun, the concrete noun,
the abstract noun, the countable noun (also called the count noun), the
non-countable noun (also called the mass noun), and the collective noun.
You should note that a noun will belong to more than one type: it will be
proper or common, abstract or concrete, *and* countable or non-countable
or collective.

If you are interested in the details of these different types, you can read about them in the following sections.

Proper Nouns

You always write a **proper noun** with a capital letter, since the noun represents the name of a specific person, place, or thing. The names of days of the week, months, historical documents, institutions, organizations, religions, their holy texts and their adherents are proper nouns. A proper noun is the opposite of a common noun

In each of the following sentences, the proper nouns are **highlighted**:

> The **Marroons** were transported from **Jamaica** and forced to build the fortifications in **Halifax**.
> Many people dread **Monday** mornings.
> **Beltane** is celebrated on the first of **May**.
> **Abraham** appears in the **Talmud** and in the **Koran**.
> Last year, I had a **Baptist**, a **Buddhist**, and a **Gardnerian Witch** as roommates.

Common Nouns

A **common noun** is a noun referring to a person, place, or thing in a general sense -- usually, you should write it with a capital letter only when it begins a sentence. A common noun is the opposite of a proper noun.

In each of the following sentences, the common nouns are **highlighted**:

> According to the **sign**, the nearest **town** is 60 **miles** away.
> All the **gardens** in the **neighbourhood** were invaded
> by **beetles** this **summer**.
> I don't understand why some **people** insist on having six
> different **kinds** of **mustard** in their **cupboards**.
> The road **crew** was startled by the **sight** of three
> large **moose** crossing the **road**.
> Many child-care **workers** are underpaid.

Sometimes you will make proper nouns out of common nouns, as in the following examples:

> The tenants in the **Garnet Apartments** are appealing the large and sudden increase in their rent.
> The meals in the Bouncing **Bean Restaurant** are less expensive than meals in ordinary restaurants.
> Many witches refer to the Renaissance as the Burning **Times**.
> The **Diary of Anne Frank** is often a child's first introduction to the history of the **Holocaust**.

Concrete Nouns

A **concrete noun** is a noun which names anything (or anyone) that you can perceive through your physical senses: touch, sight, taste, hearing, or smell. A concrete noun is the opposite of a abstract noun.

The **highlighted** words in the following sentences are all concrete nouns:

> The **judge** handed the **files** to the **clerk**.
> Whenever they take the **dog** to the **beach**, it spends hours chasing **waves**.
> The real estate **agent** urged the **couple** to buy the second **house** because it had new **shingles**.
> As the **car** drove past the **park**, the **thump** of a disco **tune** overwhelmed the string **quartet's rendition** of a **minuet**.
> The **book binder** replaced the flimsy paper **cover** with a sturdy, cloth-covered **board**.

Abstract Nouns

An **abstract noun** is a noun which names anything which you cann*ot* perceive through your five physical senses, and is the opposite of a concrete noun. The **highlighted** words in the following sentences are all abstract nouns:

> Buying the fire extinguisher was an **afterthought**.
> Tillie is amused by people who are nostalgic about **childhood**.
> **Justice** often seems to slip out of our grasp.

Countable Nouns

A **countable noun** (or **count noun**) is a noun with both a singular and a plural form, and it names anything (or anyone) that you can *count*. You can make a countable noun plural and attach it to a plural verb in a sentence. Countable nouns are the opposite of non-countable nouns and collective nouns.

In each of the following sentences, the **highlighted** words are countable nouns:

> We painted the **table** red and the **chairs** blue.
> Since he inherited his **aunt's library**, Jerome spends every **weekend** indexing his **books**.
> Miriam found six silver **dollars** in the **toe** of a **sock**.
> The oak **tree** lost three **branches** in the **hurricane**.
> Over the **course** of twenty-seven **years**, Martha Ballad delivered just over eight hundred **babies**.

Non-Countable Nouns

A **non-countable noun** (or **mass noun**) is a noun which does not have a plural form, and which refers to something that you could (or would) not usually count. A non-countable noun always takes a singular verb in a sentence. Non-countable nouns are similar to collective nouns, and are the opposite of countable nouns.

The **highlighted** words in the following sentences are non-countable nouns:

Joseph Priestly discovered **oxygen**.

The word "oxygen" cannot normally be made plural.

Oxygen is essential to human life.

Since "oxygen" is a non-countable noun, it takes the singular verb "is" rather than the plural verb "are."

We decided to sell the **furniture** rather than take it with us when we moved.

You cannot make the noun "furniture" plural.

The **furniture** is heaped in the middle of the room.

Since "furniture" is a non-countable noun, it takes a singular verb, "is heaped."

The crew spread the **gravel** over the roadbed.

You cannot make the non-countable noun "gravel" plural.

Gravel is more expensive than I thought.

Since "gravel" is a non-countable noun, it takes the singular verb form "is."

Collective Nouns

A **collective noun** is a noun naming a group of things, animals, or persons. You could count the individual members of the group, but you usually think of the group as a whole is generally as one unit. You need to be able to recognize collective nouns in order to maintain subject-verb agreement. A collective noun is similar to a non-countable noun, and is roughly the opposite of a countable noun.

In each of the following sentences, the **highlighted** word is a collective noun:

The **flock** of geese spends most of its time in the pasture.

The collective noun "flock" takes the singular verb "spends."

The **jury** is dining on take-out chicken tonight.

In this example the collective noun "jury" is the subject of the singular compound verb "is dining."

The steering **committee** meets every Wednesday afternoon.

Here the collective noun "committee" takes a singular verb, "meets."

The **class** was startled by the bursting light bulb.

In this sentence the word "class" is a collective noun and takes the singular compound verb "was startled."

What is an adjective?

An **adjective** modifies a noun or a pronoun by describing, identifying, or quantifying words. An adjective usually precedes the noun or the pronoun which it modifies.

In the following examples, the **highlighted** words are adjectives:

The **truck-shaped** balloon floated over the treetops.
Mrs. Morrison papered her **kitchen** walls with **hideous** wall paper.
The **small** boat foundered on the **wine dark** sea.
The **coal** mines are **dark** and **dank**.
Many stores have already begun to play **irritating Christmas** music.
A **battered music** box sat on the **mahogany** sideboard.
The back room was filled with **large**, **yellow** rain boots.

An adjective can be modified by an adverb, or by a phrase or clause functioning as an adverb. In the sentence

My husband knits intricately **patterned** mittens.

for example, the adverb "intricately" modifies the adjective "patterned."

Some nouns, many pronouns, and many participle phrases can also act as adjectives. In the sentence

Eleanor listened to the **muffled** sounds of the radio **hidden**under her pillow.

for example, both **highlighted** adjectives are past participles.

Grammarians also consider **articles** ("the," "a," "an") to be adjectives.

Possessive Adjectives

A **possessive adjective** ("my," "your," "his," "her," "its," "our," "their") is similar or identical to a possessive pronoun; however, it is used as an adjective and modifies a noun or a noun phrase, as in the following sentences:

I can't complete **my** assignment because I don't have the textbook.

In this sentence, the possessive adjective "my" modifies "assignment" and the noun phrase "my assignment" functions as an object. Note that the possessive pronoun form "mine" is not used to modify a noun or noun phrase.

What is **your** phone number.

Here the possessive adjective "your" is used to modify the noun phrase "phone number"; the entire noun phrase "your phone number" is a subject complement. Note that the possessive pronoun form "yours" is not used to modify a noun or a noun phrase.

The bakery sold **his** favourite type of bread.

In this example, the possessive adjective "his" modifies the noun phrase "favourite type of bread" and the entire noun phrase "his favourite type of bread" is the direct object of the verb "sold."

After many years, she returned to **her** homeland.

Here the possessive adjective "her" modifies the noun "homeland" and the noun phrase "her homeland" is the object of the preposition "to." Note also that the form "hers" is not used to modify nouns or noun phrases.

We have lost **our** way in this wood.

In this sentence, the possessive adjective "our" modifies "way" and the noun phrase "our way" is the direct object of the compound verb"have lost". Note that the possessive pronoun form "ours" is not used to modify nouns or noun phrases.

In many fairy tales, children are neglected by **their** parents.

Here the possessive adjective "their" modifies "parents" and the noun phrase "their parents" is the object of the preposition "by." Note that the possessive pronoun form "theirs" is not used to modify nouns or noun phrases.

The cat chased **its** ball down the stairs and into the backyard.

In this sentence, the possessive adjective "its" modifies "ball" and the noun phrase "its ball" is the object of the verb "chased." Note that "its" is the possessive adjective and "it's" is a contraction for "it is."

Demonstrative Adjectives

The **demonstrative adjectives** "this," "these," "that," "those," and "what" are identical to the demonstrative pronouns, but are used as adjectives to modify nouns or noun phrases, as in the following sentences:

> When the librarian tripped over **that** cord, she dropped a pile of books.

In this sentence, the demonstrative adjective "that" modifies the noun "cord" and the noun phrase "that cord" is the object of the preposition "over."

> **This** apartment needs to be fumigated.

Here "this" modifies "apartment" and the noun phrase "this apartment" is the subject of the sentence.

> Even though my friend preferred **those** plates, I bought these.

In the subordinate clause, "those" modifies "plates" and the noun phrase "those plates" is the object of the verb "preferred." In the independent clause, "these" is the direct object of the verb "bought."

Note that the relationship between a demonstrative adjective and a demonstrative pronoun is similar to the relationship between a possessive adjective and a possessive pronoun, or to that between a interrogative adjective and an interrogative pronoun.

Interrogative Adjectives

An **interrogative adjective** ("which" or "what") is like an interrogative pronoun, except that it modifies a noun or noun phrase rather than standing on its own (see also demonstrative adjectives and possessive adjectives):

> **Which** plants should be watered twice a week?

Like other adjectives, "which" can be used to modify a noun or a noun phrase. In this example, "which" modifies "plants" and the noun phrase "which plants" is the subject of the compound verb "should be watered":

> **What** book are you reading?

In this sentence, "what" modifies "book" and the noun phrase "what book" is the direct object of the compound verb "are reading."

Indefinite Adjectives

An **indefinite adjective** is similar to an indefinite pronoun, except that it modifies a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase, as in the following sentences:

Many people believe that corporations are under-taxed.

The indefinite adjective "many" modifies the noun "people" and the noun phrase "many people" is the subject of the sentence.

I will send you any mail that arrives after you have moved to Sudbury.

The indefinite adjective "any" modifies the noun "mail" and the noun phrase "any mail" is the direct object of the compound verb "will send."

They found a few goldfish floating belly up in the swan pound.

In this example the indefinite adjective modifies the noun "goldfish" and the noun phrase is the direct object of the verb "found":

The title of Kelly's favourite game is "All dogs go to heaven."

Here the indefinite pronoun "all" modifies "dogs" and the full title is a subject complement.

What is an adverb?

An **adverb** can modify a verb, an adjective, another adverb, a phrase, or a clause. An adverb indicates manner, time, place, cause, or degree and answers questions such as "how," "when," "where," "how much".

While some adverbs can be identified by their characteristic "ly" suffix, most of them must be identified by untangling the grammatical relationships within the sentence or clause as a whole. Unlike an adjective, an adverb can be found in various places within the sentence.

In the following examples, each of the **highlighted** words is an adverb:

The seamstress **quickly** made the mourning clothes.

In this sentence, the adverb "quickly" modifies the verb "made" and indicates in what manner (or how fast) the clothing was constructed.

The midwives waited **patiently** through a long labour.

Similarly in this sentence, the adverb "patiently" modifies the verb "waited" and describes the manner in which the midwives waited.

> The **boldly** spoken words would return to haunt the rebel.

In this sentence the adverb "boldly" modifies the adjective "spoken."

> We urged him to dial the number more **expeditiously**.

Here the adverb "more" modifies the adverb "expeditiously."

> **Unfortunately**, the bank closed at three **today**.

In this example, the adverb "unfortunately" modifies the entire sentence.

Conjunctive Adverbs

You can use a **conjunctive adverb** to join two clauses together. Some of the most common conjunctive adverbs are "also," "consequently," "finally," "furthermore," "hence," "however," "incidentally," "indeed," "instead," "likewise," "meanwhile," "nevertheless," "next," "nonetheless," "otherwise," "still," "then," "therefore," and "thus." A conjunctive adverb is *not* strong enough to join two independent clauses without the aid of a semicolon.

The **highlighted** words in the following sentences are conjunctive adverbs:

> The government has cut university budgets; **consequently**, class sizes have been increased.
> He did not have all the ingredients the recipe called for; **therefore**, he decided to make something else.
> The report recommended several changes to the ways the corporation accounted for donations; **furthermore**, it suggested that a new auditor be appointed immediately.
> The crowd waited patiently for three hours; **finally**, the doors to the stadium were opened.
> Batman and Robin fruitlessly searched the building; **indeed**, the Joker had escaped through a secret door in the basement.

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