

THE BASICS OF SPEECH 1: NOUNS

In the English language, nouns are words that name persons (**manager**, **uncle**), animals (**lion**, **dinosaur**), places (**bank**, **court**), things (**skateboard**, **frying pan**), and concepts/ideas (**beauty**, **rights**).

Nouns fall under various groups and can be categorized in two different ways:

- i. The first (and general) way is to classify nouns as *common*, *proper*, and *collective* nouns.
- ii. The second identifies nouns in relation to how they are used: by their *form* (case, gender, and number), by their *function* (appositive, complement, modifier, object, and subject), and by their *class* (abstract, collective, common, concrete, and proper).

In this essay the second method will be described, to give the reader a more comprehensive look at the role nouns play in formal speech/writing.

BY FORM

Three Cases of Nouns

The case of a noun determines how a noun is used in relation to other words, phrases, or clauses. A noun can be identified as one under three cases. The three cases are as follows:

In the **nominative case** (or **subjective case**), a noun, or a pronoun, is used as the subject of a verb. (The subject is the noun or pronoun that performs the action of the verb).

Faisal **sought** the comfort of his mother after the accident.
(The verb *sought* is performed by the nominative *Faisal*)

A noun is also in the nominative when it is used as a predicate noun. (A predicate noun follows a linking verb [such as *is*, *was*, *were*, *smells*, *appears*] and repeats, or renames the subject).

The group **Outkast** consists of **Andre 3000 and Big Boi**.
(The series *Andre 3000 and Big Boi* is the predicate noun renaming *Outkast*.)

In the **objective case**, a noun is used as the direct object, the indirect object, or the object of the preposition. (A *direct object* receives the action of a complete or transitive verb. An *indirect object* names the person [or thing] to whom [or to what], or for whom [or for what] something is done. The

indirect object usually precedes the direct object in a sentence. The first noun or pronoun to follow a preposition is known as the object of the preposition).

Faisal gave all his **riches to the beggar**.

(*riches* is the direct object, receiving the action of the complete verb: It is what Faisal gave. *the beggar* and *to the beggar* are both indirect objects telling for whom the action was performed. *the beggar* is also both an indirect object, and an object of the preposition *to*.)

In the **possessive case**, a noun shows possession or ownership. Usually, an apostrophe (and sometimes an s) is used to indicate the possessive case of a noun depending on whether the noun is singular or plural.

The **dog's** anger raged but the **farmers'** strength proved impossible to triumph over. (*dog's* is the possessive case of the singular noun *dog*. *farmers'* is the possessive case for the plural noun *farmers*.)

Noun Gender

Additionally, nouns can be identified on the basis of **gender**. The gender of a word is based on its biology. English consists of three gender nouns: the masculine, the feminine, and the neuter.

A **masculine noun** (**father, priest, bucks**) denotes the male.

A **feminine noun** (**mother, sister, doe**) denotes the female.

A **neuter noun** (**bicycle, wardrobe, salt**) identifies nouns without sex.

It should be noted that animals can be identified by either the neuter gender, or their biological gender. In addition, some inanimate objects are assigned the masculine or feminine gender (for example, one of the largest yachts in the world, the *Indian Empress*, is referred to as a she).

Noun Number

Nouns can also be grouped according to their **number**. The number identifies a noun as singular or plural.

A **singular noun** is used to name one person, animal, place, thing, or concept.

chair, artist, lake, cat, advice

A **plural noun** refers to more than one person, animal, place, thing, or concept. The plural form of

most nouns is made by adding an *s* or *es*:

bars, pitches, cats, fishes

For the remaining few nouns, their plural forms end irregularly:

die – dice, woman – women, criterion – criteria, cactus - cacti

BY FUNCTION

This section will be dealt with later in an essay on sentences.

BY CLASS

Common nouns name people, places, animals, things, or concepts in a non-specific way. Common nouns are not capitalized unless they begin a sentence.

boy, country, summer, bat, feelings

Proper nouns are the names of specific people, places, animals, things, and ideas. Proper nouns always begin with a capital letter:

Brazil, Michael Jackson, January, Buddhism, Mercedes-Benz

Collective nouns name groups or units.

team, crew, dozen, United Kingdom, Manchester United

When a collective noun is assigned to the group as a whole, it is understood as singular. When it refers to individual elements of the group, it is treated as plural.

A majority vote is crucial to passing the amendment.

Our class is going to visit the ancient ruins by the river.

[Singular uses of collective nouns]

They are going their separate ways once graduation is over.

More than a dozen members of the fledgling NGO are in disagreement with the board's revised policies.

[Plural uses of collective nouns]

A **concrete noun** names that which is tangible. These are things that can be heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. Concrete nouns are either proper, or common nouns.

Indonesia, The Parthenon, rice, organs, soldier

An **abstract noun** names that which is intangible, and is either a common or a proper noun. Ideas, theories, feelings, and thoughts are considered to be abstract nouns.

Nirvana, competition, Hasidism, gravity, socialism

Nouns can also be classed as **countable nouns** or **uncountable nouns**. These two will be looked at later in an essay on articles.

In the next Basics of Speech, we will be looking into pronouns.

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