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Chapter 1

THE NOUN

Chapter learning goals

This chapter focuses on nouns:

- common nouns
- proper nouns
- abstract nouns
- collective nouns
- singular and plural nouns
- subject and object nouns.

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to identify nouns and the ways in which they work in sentences. In doing this, you will be engaging functional as well as traditional grammar.

Learning goals associated with this chapter include:

- ✓ identification of nouns as the names of things and the ways these function in sentences
- ✓ identification of concrete and abstract nouns
- ✓ identification of common and proper nouns
- ✓ rules and uses for singular and plural forms of nouns
- ✓ identification of collective nouns
- ✓ identification of subject and object in relation to nouns.

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THE NOUN

A noun is the name of any person, place, action, quality, feeling, idea, or thing. It is where we start our language journey as we learn to name the things in our world.

Try it 1.1

Give five examples of your own of each one of these.

Person: / / / /

Place: / / / /

Action: / / / /

Quality: / / / /

Feeling: / / / /

Idea: / / / /

Thing: / / / /

Below are some suggested answers:

Person: teacher, Mrs Ballantyne, mother, neighbour, child, Polly Ryan.

Place: town, school, shop, Australia, room.

Action: murder, walking, writing, turn, ageing.

Quality: honesty, evil, beauty, dishonesty, kindness.

Feeling: hatred, love, fear, insecurity, confidence.

Idea: communism, capitalism, Buddhism, Anglicanism, philosophy.

Thing: chair, dog, paper, floor, CD, bowl.

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You probably had no problems with person or place, but you may have had to think twice about action. The children that you teach will probably have the same reaction. We have all been taught that verbs are the words that deal with action, but there are names of actions as well. You may do something, like murder someone, but the name of that action is a noun, *murder*:

He was found guilty of her murder.

It is a murder most foul.

She cried blue murder.

Similarly, you may see someone walking, and you might think that you will take up the activity, thinking, *Walking is good for my health*. The name of that activity or action is *walking*, and in this sentence it is a **noun**.

You may be one who prefers to use a computer rather than pen and paper to communicate messages, for you may consider, *My writing is terrible*. Here, *writing* is a **noun**.

You may see someone go around a corner, that is, they *turn* a corner. Here, *turn* is a verb. By contrast, you may find there is a time when it is *your turn to speak*. Here, *turn* is a **noun**.

Over time, you will see that a person ages, but in the process, you may come to the conclusion that *ageing* is a natural process of life. Here again, *ageing* is a **noun**.

If you establish that the word is naming someone or something, then you can identify it as a noun.

Nouns naming qualities, feelings or ideas may cause children some problems as well, and you can explain these nouns to them in similar terms: if it is the name of something, it is a noun. One way to help children is to show them that if they can put *a/an* or *the*, or more usually, something like *my* or *blue* in front of it, the fact that it is a noun becomes clear. (*My* is useful as it simplifies the explanation as in *My belief is solid*. Rather than going through all the possessive pronouns, give the example of *my*. I use *blue* only because it is my favourite colour, but any adjective will do for the demonstration.)

We may also take qualities, for example. If you are an honest person, the name of the quality that you possess is *honesty*; if you are not an honest person, the name of that quality is *dishonesty*. Then you will use a sentence like *Your honesty ought to be rewarded* to establish the word's function as a noun.

Concrete and abstract nouns

As you proceed along these lines, you will be introducing children to concepts of concrete and abstract nouns.

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Concrete nouns are the names of people, places, and things that you can see, hear, touch, quantify or measure in some way. This applies to the first five examples of the names of people given earlier—teacher, Mrs Ballantyne, neighbour, child, Polly Ryan—and those of places: town, school, shop, Australia, room.

It is when we get into the names of qualities, feelings and ideas that we get into the area of abstract nouns, and sometimes these may be more difficult concepts for children to grasp. One way of explaining it is to suggest that a concrete noun is anything that you can trip over in the corridor, and that it is not possible to trip over an abstract noun.

This idea helps them to understand that one may trip over a *murderer*, a *walker*, a *writer*, a *turner*, or an *aged person*, but not over *murder*, *walking*, *writing*, *turn*, *ageing*. By the same token, one may trip over a *hated*, *loved*, *feared*, *insecure* or *confident person*, but one cannot trip over *hatred*, *love*, *fear*, *insecurity*, or *confidence*. One may trip over a *communist*, a *capitalist*, a *Buddhist*, an *Anglican* or a *philosopher* in the corridor, but not (at least, not literally) over *communism*, *capitalism*, *Buddhism*, *Anglicanism*, or *philosophy*. Again, using a sentence to show how the word functions as a noun will work.

When you give examples of each of these, you will find that you are drawing on your **semantic** (meaning) and **syntactic** (structure) knowledge of the language to confirm what you suggest. If you use the word in a sentence, you will see whether it makes sense or not. That is a good guide to the way a word functions in a sentence to create the meaning that is intended. Try this with the activities given below.



Try it 1.2

Write down the concrete nouns from which these abstract nouns have been formed (person, place, action, quality, feeling, idea, thing):

priesthood:

Prebyterianism:

socialism:

politics:

belief:

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Answers

priest
Presbyterian
socialist
politician
believer

Common and proper nouns

Common nouns are general terms naming everyday, common-or-garden variety things and start with a lower case letter:

teacher, school, student, town/city, friend, rat.

Proper nouns are individual terms naming unique individuals and start with an upper case letter:

teacher: *Mr Kelly*
school: *Wendouree Primary School*
student: *Deborah Politis*
town/city: *Ballarat*
friend: *Pat Smith*
rat: *Basil*

Whether children apply the concept of upper and lower case letters for proper and common nouns or not will have no real bearing on the function of the word, but it will make the meaning more precise in their writing. Starting proper nouns with a capital letter and common nouns with a lower case letter is really part of spelling conventions, not necessarily a grammatical consideration, but children ought to know it as part of producing their own polished pieces of writing.

On this point, we do not usually call our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles by their names. We give our parents and grandparents respectfully affectionate names such as *Mum, Mummy* and *Mama* for our mothers; *Dad, Daddy*, and *Papa* for our fathers; *Nanna, Gran, Grandma, Granny, Pop, Granddad* and *Grandpa* for our grandparents.

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Aunts and uncles are given the courtesy title of *Auntie* or *Aunt* and *Uncle* before their given names. This is correct.

What is not correct is then using the names or titles we give our relatives when we address them as naming what they are: we have *mothers* and *fathers*, not *mums* and *dads*! We have *grandmothers* and *grandfathers*, not *nans* and *pops*! We have *aunts*, not *aunties*!

It is incorrect to introduce or refer to your parents as *my/your mum* or *my/your dad*. It is incorrect to refer to the *mums and dads of Australia*! They are the *mothers and fathers* of Australia! It is incorrect to introduce or refer to your *aunt* as your *auntie*! We do hear people, including teachers, use such terms, and the Grammar Police judge them on their lack of knowledge.

Hot Tip 1.1: It is the way that the word is used in the sentences that determines whether it is a noun or not (*murder, writing, love, killing*). This is so for almost all parts of speech. Use a word in a sentence (semantic and syntactic knowledge) to check whether it is a noun or some other part of speech.

Plural nouns

- a Most nouns take their plural forms by adding *s*: *hat, parent, umbrella, day, TV, 1980* become *hats, parents, umbrellas, days, TVs, 1980s*.
- b Nouns ending in *s, x, z, ch, sh* add *es*: *princess, box, waltz, watch, marsh* become *princesses, boxes, waltzes, watches, marshes*.
- c Nouns ending in *f* or *fe* change the *f* into *v* and add *es*: *wife, thief, dwarf* become *wives, thieves, dwarves* (not *dwarfs*, as the Disney film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* suggests. Again there is a reason: *dwarfs* is a verb [as in a tall person who *dwarfs* another]). The plurals of *hoof* and *roof* used always to be given as *hooves* and *rooves*, but we do accept *hoofs* and *roofs* nowadays.
(Can you think of any other exceptions? *Belief* becomes *beliefs*, *chief* becomes *chiefs*, *handkerchief* becomes *handkerchiefs*. There are reasons for these: *believes* is a verb, *chief* comes from the French *chef*. Foreign words often come with their foreign rules of grammar.)
- d Nouns ending in a consonant and a *y* immediately following a consonant change the *y* into *i* and add *es*: *diary, story, baby, lady* become *diaries, stories, babies, ladies*.
- e Nouns ending in a vowel and a *y* just add *s* (see first rule): *valley, storey, Monday* become *valleys, storeys, Mondays*.

Note: none of this applies to surnames.

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We always simply add **s** to surnames that end in **y**:

Kennedy *Kennedys*

Kelly *Kellys*

Hendry *Hendrys*

f For nouns ending in **o** there is really only a rule of thumb: if the word is English, add **es**; if it is foreign, add **s**: *piano*, *tomato*, *negro*, *folio*, *memo* become *pianos*, *tomatoes*, *negroes*, *volcanoes*, *folios*, *memos*.

g Some nouns have irregular plurals: *child*, (*wo*)*man*, *fungus*, *goose*, *deer* have rather idiosyncratic plural forms, so that they become (*wo*)*men*, *fungi*, *geese*, *deer*.

Note: there are no apostrophes in any of the plural nouns given here. Have you found yourself wanting to put an apostrophe to any of these words? For some people, a word ending in **s** forms an irresistible attraction to add an apostrophe. This is incorrect!

There are rules for using apostrophes, as shown in Chapter 4. Remember that under no circumstances, with no exceptions to the rule, does a possessive noun have an apostrophe to show that it is a plural noun.

This can be something that children find a new concept as well. After all, they have been bombarded with advertising that throws an apostrophe in willy-nilly. It is not beyond the comprehension of children that apostrophes are not to be used to indicate plural nouns, and it is certainly not beyond ours. Understanding this, there are those of us, members of the ever-lurking Grammar Police, who simply do not buy any grammatically incorrect *chicken kiev's*!

We can try this with a common expression, *keeping up with the Joneses*.

This is correctly written. Think of the rules:

- 1 A noun is the name of something and a proper noun has a capital letter: *Jones*.
- 2 If the noun ends in **s**, add **es**: *Joneses*.
- 3 Under no circumstances is an apostrophe used to indicate a plural noun; it is *Joneses* with no apostrophe.

That is simple, isn't it? If you try to do it any other way, you are complicating things unnecessarily and being incorrect as well.

We can try it with other names of people that end in **s**: *James*; *Zeegers*; *Rogers*; *Richards*.

What do we get, knowing our rule? We get *Jameses*; *Zeegerses*; *Rogerses*; *Richardses*.

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You may use them in sentences like:

We had drinks with the Jameses.

The Zeegerses are getting together for a big family reunion.

The Rogerses have written a book together.

With the birth of another child, there are now eight Richardses altogether.

We say plurals like these all the time; we tend not to write them because they hardly ever come up in writing, except for the *keeping up with the Joneses* sort of statement. The rule about nouns ending in **s**, **x**, **z**, **ch** or **sh**

does come up with things like *boxes*, *princesses*, *actresses* (and all those other —**ess** genderised forms of words, like *actresses*, that we do not use any more because we do not use sexist terms). Because of what they hear in the pronunciation of such words, and because of what they encounter in advertising, children may find this idea of no apostrophes to show plural nouns new, and, if they feel that magnetic pull of **s** on apostrophes, may simply try it that way in their writing. It is quite incorrect, and the Grammar Police are ever alert to this sort of thing.

- h **Collective nouns** are things grouped to help to give particular meaning—a *herd of sheep*, a *school of fish*, a *class of children*—or to add meaning in the choice of word to describe the group: a *murder of crows*; a *gaggle of geese*; a *business of ferrets*.

Note: the group is a number of items, but the collective term for them is singular.

You may have a *range of issues*, for example, which means that the verb you will use with this expression will also be singular: a *range of issues is to be raised* (not *are*); *the next wave of athletes is coming* (not *are*).

- i **Uncountable nouns** are always singular when taken as a grouping: *hair* (but *strands of hair*); *furniture* (but *tables, chairs, beds*); *luggage* (but *bags, cases*).

Note: still no apostrophes!

Hot Tip 1.2: An apostrophe is never used to show the plural form of a noun. There are no exceptions to this rule!

IN CONTEXT

Programme and *program*: which do we use? In Australia, we favour *program*. In some other places, such as in the United States and United Kingdom, people favour *programme* (but use *program* for computer programs); we consider it an affectation to use the French spelling, a suggestion of a French education that we may or may not have. We consider *program* to be English, and so this is the one that we use.

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FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

Now that you know what a noun is, you can take your knowledge a step further to consider its functions:

- A noun—the name of something or someone (the subject of a sentence)—
- does something (the verb, see Chapter 9) to or in or for or with or ...
- another noun—also the name of something or someone [the object of the sentence]—
- in a sentence.

It sets up the basic sentence structure of English: Subject–Verb–Object (S–V[–O]):

Birds (noun: subject) *fly* in *the air* (noun: object).

In this sentence, *birds* (a noun) *fly* (do something in) *air* (a noun).

In relation to functional grammar, a noun (*bird*) is the subject of the sentence, and another noun (*air*) is the object of the sentence, the way a correct sentence is written.

REVIEW

You should now feel that you understand the noun well enough to teach it simply and clearly. Read the summary points below, then move on to the revision and practice exercises.

Summary points

There are three main things to remember about nouns:

- 1 They name all things, including things we cannot see, hear, touch, or smell.
- 2 There are rules for using them as singulars and plurals, and none of these rules includes the use of the apostrophe.
- 3 They are the subject and object of sentences.

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END OF CHAPTER REVISION

- 1 A noun is the name of any what?
..... / / / / /
..... /
- 2 a Suggest an appropriate noun for the following collective nouns:
a pack of, a string of, a litter of,
a gang of
- b Mark which are singular (S) and which are plural (P) in 2a.
- 3 Give plurals for:
table:, woman:, TV:, tooth:,
CD:, penny:, sheep:, memo:,
azalea:, viola:, pizza:
- 4 Give abstract nouns for:
integral:, capitalist:, warm:, real:,
true:, beautiful:, young:, Hindu:,
ethnic:

Answers appear on page 152.