Nouns: The Basics

What Are Nouns?

Nouns are commonly defined as people, places, or things. They address the "who" or "what" of a sentence.

The most reliable sign that a given word is a noun is if it follows an article like "the" or "a."

Examples: ***The world*** is round.
              I saw ***a vampire*** last night.

Nouns can also follow possessives or numbers.

Examples: There are ***four pillows*** on my bed.
              Our car was stolen.

Occasionally, a word we typically think of as an adjective can also function as a noun.

Examples: We are going to paint our walls ***blue***. (Here, ***blue*** is an adjective.)
              The darker ***blue*** is closer to what we want. (Here, ***blue*** is a noun.)
              There are so many pretty ***blues*** in the photo. (Here, ***blue*** is a noun, and it takes the plural form.)

Many adjectives, however, cannot function as nouns.

Examples: You can never correctly say, "You are an ***angry.***"
              We could say, "You are an ***angry person***," or "You are ***angry***," but ***angry*** itself cannot function as a noun.

Not all nouns are concrete objects. Some nouns are abstract.

Examples: I will not have my ***authority*** questioned.
              My ***goals*** are lofty.
              (***Authority*** and ***goals*** are abstract nouns because they are not tangible objects: they are ideas.)

How Do I Determine if a Word Is a Noun?

An easy way to tell whether or not a word is a noun is to use a frame sentence to test the word.

(A/An/The) _____ seem(s) all right.

Examples: The ***table*** seems all right.
              Tables seem all right.

- The articles "a/an/the" appear in parentheses in the frame sentence because the noun may or may not follow an article.
- The noun also may or may not be plural. Therefore, depending on its plurality, *seem* or *seems* may follow the noun.
- If a word makes sense in this frame sentence, it is almost always a noun.

There are, of course, some exceptions to the frame-sentence rule. Some nouns fit into the frame sentence but share no other noun characteristics.

Example: ***Editing*** seems all right.
(A word like ***editing*** is considered a gerund—a verb that is functioning as a noun. Note that ***editing*** is the subject of this sample sentence.)

Some nouns are created by modifying an adjective like fluent (which can become the noun ***fluency***) or a verb like write (which can become the noun ***writer***).

Example: Her ***fluency*** makes her a good ***writer.***

Most nouns can become plural or possessive.

Example: There are twenty-seven ***tigers*** at the zoo. Don't enter that ***tiger's*** cage.

Some nouns, like *water* or *sand*, cannot be made plural. Generally, these are nouns that cannot be counted.

Example: You can never correctly say, "There are fifty-two sands in my shoe."
(***Sand*** is a non-count noun, and it cannot be made plural.)

To transform a non-count noun into a count noun, it has to be modified.

Example: I am looking to sell eighteen ***pieces*** of ***furniture***.
(***Furniture*** is a non-count noun; however, the noun ***pieces*** is countable.)

Activity

Identify the noun(s) in the following sentences. Use the frame sentence if you have trouble.

1. His truancy led to his detainment.
2. How many students are in the class?
3. I was on a game show, and I won two pieces of luggage!
4. Are you afraid of the dark?
5. He is a shortsighted, imbecilic, donkey-eyed, infantile hillbilly.
6. Blame it on the chancellor.
7. His paper contains forty-two nouns.
8. A majority of citizens voted against the law.

Identify whether the italicized word is functioning as a verb or as a gerund.

9. I am *sweating* like a pig.
10. His *pedaling* is very impressive.
11. *Running* is just too much fun to turn down.
12. I am *giving* up cheese to lose weight.

Answer Key for Activity

1) truancy, detainment
2) students, class
3) game show, pieces, luggage
4) dark
5) hillbilly
6) chancellor
7) paper, nouns
8) majority, citizens, law
9) verb
10) gerund (*note the possessive **his***)
11) gerund
12) verb

References

Klammer, Thomas P., and Muriel Schulz. *Analyzing English Grammar*. 6th ed. New York:

    Longman, 2010. Print.