

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Nouns

Types of Nouns

The word “**noun**” is simply another word for “**name**,” so nouns are **names** of persons, places, things, or ideas. Nouns are most commonly used as the subject or direct object of a sentence, although there are several other uses. Nouns may be classified a number of ways and may belong to more than one category:

‡ **Common nouns** refer to persons, places, things, or ideas in a general sense, not to a specific example.

dog	house
woman	literature
art	opera
street	park

‡ **Proper nouns** refer to the names of **specific** persons, places, things, or ideas and are always capitalized.

Betty Lou Jones	Mr. Clean
Yellowstone Park	Carmel Valley
Tuesday	October
Bay View School	Sixth Street

‡ **Concrete nouns** refer to things that can be identified through the five senses: hearing, taste, touch, smell, sight. They are **physical** objects and generally have a specific form that can be described. They are the opposite of abstract nouns.

table	photograph
mountain	spoon
apple	book

‡ **Abstract nouns** refer to intangible concepts and qualities such as ideas and emotions. They are the opposite of concrete nouns.

hunger	adulthood
love	hope
truth	justice
ambition	competition
afterthought	insanity

‡ **Collective nouns** refer to a group of people, animals, or things. Even in their singular form, they have the sense of being made of many parts, but they are treated as one unit, as a whole. A common error with these nouns is using a plural verb with the singular form; however, when they are in the plural form, of course a plural verb is used: My **team is** winning. All the local **teams have** first-rate players.

committee	team
jury	herd
class	family
couple	audience
flock	group

‡ **Countable nouns** (or **count nouns**) refer to persons, places, and things that can be counted; they have both a singular and plural form. Nouns with irregular plurals are count nouns.

One	More than one
one child	three children
an island	twin islands
a sheep	a dozen sheep
the branch	all branches
one knife	six knives

‡ **Non-countable nouns**, also called **mass nouns**, refer to things and ideas that are not usually used in a plural form. They can be recognized as words that cannot be counted with number words (*one, two, three*) or used with the indefinite article *a/an*. They are similar to collective nouns.

Abstractions: beauty, knowledge, luck

Food: cheese, meat, corn, sugar

Languages: Spanish, English, Chinese

Sports and games: tennis, soccer, chess

Liquids and gases: water, air, oxygen, blood

Academic fields: physics, literature, chemistry

Weather words: rain, snow, wind, sunshine

Materials: glass, plastic, wood, gold

Natural phenomena: electricity, space

Gerunds: swimming, wishing, running

‡ Sometimes the number of items implied by a non-count noun is unclear:

The **luggage is** heavy. (*This could mean one piece of luggage or several pieces.*)

Incorrect: One luggage is heavy; two luggages are heavy; a luggage is heavy.

‡ A non-count noun often has a collective or generic sense:

The farmer grows **wheat**. Farmer Brown grows **cotton**.

Incorrect: The farmer grows three wheats. Farmer Brown grows a cotton.

‡ Idiomatic or jargon usage can affect the rule (*and is correct in current English*):

Jargon: Order me **a tea**. Unusual **teas are** very trendy.

Standard expression: Order me **a cup of tea**. Unusual **tea is** very trendy.

Jargon: **Plastics are** used in a variety of products.

Standard expression: **Plastic is** useful for many products.

Incorrect: **Plastic are** useful material. **A plastic is** useful.

Singular and Plural Nouns

If a noun is **singular**, it names only **one** person, place, thing, or idea.

If a noun is **plural**, it names **more than one** person, place, thing, or idea.

Note: Singular nouns used as the subject in a sentence must use a singular verb; plural nouns must have a plural form of the verb when used as the subject. **See also** the handout on **Subject/Verb Agreement**.

✦ The plural of most nouns is formed by adding “**s**” or “**es**” to the singular form:

My sister parked her **car** in my driveway. Several **cars** are racing at Laguna Seca.

The pianist played a popular **composition**. The **compositions** of Beethoven are complex and interesting.

✦ The plural of some nouns ending with “**y**” is formed by changing the “**y**” to “**ies**”:

The **company** will sell more stock tomorrow. The two **companies** plan to merge.

We will drive to the next **city**. Most very large **cities** have blighted areas.

Babies cry a lot, but my **baby** never cries.

✦ The plural of some nouns ending with “**f**” or “**fe**” is formed by deleting the final “**f/fe**” and adding “**ves**”:

The ship docked at the **wharf**. The port has numerous **wharves** for merchant ships.

His **wife** hosted a party for the **wives** of all the ambassadors.

He took his **life** in his hands. The **lives** of the crew were in his hands.

✦ The plural of some nouns is formed by changing a middle letter or adding letters:

She is a happy **child**. Several **children** in the neighborhood formed a baseball team.

The **man** eats several hot dogs at every game. That **woman** runs in marathons. Several **men** and **women** applied for the management position.

✦ The plural of some nouns is the same as the singular form or may be irregular:

One **deer** ran across the road, but a family of **deer** stayed under the trees.

Not a creature was stirring, not even a **mouse**. When the cat’s away, the **mice** will play.