

NOUNS & NOUN PHRASES

Nouns are probably the most common type of content words and can function in many ways (they have many different “jobs” in the sentence):

- the subject of the sentence,
- the object (last word) in a prepositional phrase,
- the object of a sentence, or noun complement (after a “linking verb”)

There are different types of nouns:

- Proper nouns are names that indicate a specific person, place, or thing. Proper nouns always start with a capital letter.
The University of California has nine campuses.
- Common nouns are generic names and are not capitalized.
A university is a place where students can learn about themselves.
- Countable nouns are nouns that can actually be counted: one spoon, two spoons, etc. They are nouns that have a plural form.
Universities have many resources available to students.
- Uncountable nouns do not have a plural form and are used with a singular verb:
Research is important at UC Davis.

It is sometimes possible to spot a noun by its ending:

-ment	argument	establishment
-ness	sadness	messiness
-tion	application	indication
-sion	expression	admission
-ity	legibility	impossibility
-ence	difference	evidence
-ance	importance	distance
-ure	departure	closure
-er	teacher	speaker
-ism	socialism	sexism
-ist	specialist	typist
-ship	scholarship	friendship

Quite often nouns will occur with other words, or a combination of other words, to make up *noun phrases*.

A **noun phrase** is a **group of words whose job is to modify a noun**. Think of the noun as the most important player on a team, with other players supporting this player’s performance. The other players make this MVP (most valuable player) more efficient and help him or her to play better. Without the rest of the team, even the best player seems average.

The chart below demonstrates the structure of a noun phrase.¹ The noun phrases in the following sentences are underlined with the noun in boldface. All parts of each noun phrase have been put into the chart that follows:

¹ Adapted from Nigel Caplan “Noun Phrase Structure” chapter.

1. *My favorite theory professor from Sac State has retired.*
2. *Many undergraduate college students at UC Davis majoring in Economics are international.*
3. *Plagiarism affects many different people from students to faculty.*
4. *The first-year students taking part in other activities tend to have more balance in their lives.*

Modifiers (describe nouns)				Head Noun	Qualifiers (more specific information)	
Quantifier	Determiner	Adverb/ Adjective	Noun Modifier (usually nouns but function as adjective)		Prepositional Phrase	-ing Phrase or -ed Phrase
	My	favorite	theory	professor		
Many		undergraduate	college	students	at UC Davis	majoring in Economics
many		different		people	from faculty to students	
	The	first-year		students	in other activities	taking part

ACTIVITY: IDENTIFYING PARTS OF A NOUN PHRASE

Each sentence below has a noun phrase in italics. Fill in the chart that follows by placing each part of the noun phrase in the appropriate box.

1. Discussion boards promote *student collaboration in the classroom*.
2. *Most writing topics in UWP courses* focus on supporting your opinion.
3. *All UWP students* are expected to submit a thoughtful writing portfolio of their work at the end of the quarter.

Modifiers (describe nouns)				Head Noun	Qualifiers (more specific information)	
Quantifier	Determiner	Adverb/ Adjective	Noun Modifier		Prepositional Phrase	-ing Phrase or -ed Phrase

English nouns are often described as “countable” or “uncountable.”

A. Countable Nouns:

Countable nouns are easy to recognize. They are things that we can count. For example: “document.” We can have one, two, three, or more documents. Here are some more countable nouns:

Examples: studies, examples, papers, exams, courses, students, theories, statistics, opinions

Countable nouns can be singular or plural:

Can you give me an example of plagiarism?

You have given me many examples of plagiarism.

We can use the indefinite article a/an with countable nouns:

We have an exam next week.

When a countable noun is singular, we must use a word like a/the/my/this with it:

I don't have an opinion on this issue.

My opinion stands in opposition to your opinion.

When a countable noun is plural, we can use it alone:

Studies have shown college students are distracted by their cell phones.

We can use some and any with countable nouns:

Some studies report that many students are addicted to social media.

We can use a few and many with countable nouns:

I've got a few dollars. I haven't got many pens.

In English, most plural forms of nouns end in -s:

book/books, student/students, computer/computers

However, sometimes we have irregular plural forms. Irregular simply means that these forms don't follow the usual -s rule for plurals. These plurals look different:

child/children, man/men, woman/women, person/people

ACTIVITY: USING COUNTABLE NOUNS CORRECTLY

Choose the correct answer to complete the sentence.

1. Strong _____ (writer/writers) see the problems in their writing.
2. The author used a large amount of data and _____ (survey/surveys) to show that international students in some colleges had declined applications.
3. My survey found there are many significant _____ (problem/problems) that most international students and their parents are concerned about.
4. I don't know how student groups feel about this particular _____ (issue/issues).

B. Uncountable/Mass Nouns:

Uncountable or mass nouns *do not have a plural form* because they **cannot be separated and counted**. If they are the subject, they are always used with a *singular verb*:

Examples: homework, money, evidence, advice, research, information, knowledge, grammar, vocabulary

Incorrect: I have to do more reading in order to increase my vocabularies.

Correct: I have to do more reading in order to increase my vocabulary.

Incorrect: This quarter, I have improved my grammars and use of evidences.

Correct: This quarter, I have improved my grammar and use of evidence.

Incorrect: I have read many researches about human influence on climate change.

Correct: I have read a lot of research about human influence on climate change.

Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable, depending on their meaning. These nouns refer to ideas or concepts, so many of them cannot be made plural, but some can be.

Sometimes, nouns can move from specific to general. When a noun is thought of as a specific person, place, or thing, it is often plural and we can make it plural. However, if the noun is very general and becomes abstract (existing not as a physical thing, but an idea), it is usually non-count. Consider, for example, the noun *experiences*.

1. *She had many experiences with plagiarism as an OSSJA advisor.*

The sentence is referring to specific, countable moments in her life as an OSSJA advisor.

2. *Her position advising students at OSSJA requires experience.*

This sentence uses *experience* in an abstract way; it is not something you can count; it's more like an idea, a general thing that people need to have in order to apply for this job.

3. *The discussion group meets two times a week.*

"Times" refers to countable events or moments, so it is plural.

4. *Students must learn to manage their time so they don't fall behind.*

The word *time* is now uncountable; the sentence refers to the general, abstract idea of time.

5. *Scientists have studied recent climate changes in the rain forest.*

This sentence refers to many instances, and each demonstrates a *change*.

6. *Scientists all over the world have confirmed that climate change is a real threat.*

This sentence refers to the topic of the earth's warming. This refers to one large, abstract theory, so it is not countable.

Finally, many mass nouns can become count nouns when they are used to describe categories:

- a. In my economics class we discussed monies or currencies from different countries.
- b. There were some real beauties in that rose garden.
- c. We had some serious difficulties in this project.

But some things cannot be made countable or plural:

We cannot have evidences, informations, knowledges, researches, or vocabularies.

These researches are very important to climate change legislations.

Both research and legislation are *not* countable, so they will *not* be plural.

This research is very important to climate change legislation.

When in doubt, consult a good dictionary (see Academic Reading and Vocabulary: Using a Dictionary to Build Vocabulary, pp. 8–9).

Non-count nouns frequently occur in academic writing. Here are some common categories of non-count nouns. Like all things in English (and language in general), there may be exceptions.

Category	Examples
A mass	work, equipment, homework, money, transportation, clothing, luggage, jewelry, traffic, audience, faculty
A natural substance	air, ice, water, fire, wood, blood, hair, gold, silver, climate, oxygen
Food	milk, rice, coffee, bread, sugar, meat, water
An abstract concept	advice, happiness, health, education, research, knowledge, information, time, vocabulary, evidence, feedback
A game	soccer, tennis, basketball, hockey, football, chess
A disease	diabetes, measles, polio, influenza, malaria, hypothyroidism, arthritis
A subject of study	economics, physics, astronomy, biology, history, statistics, composition, psychology
A language	Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, English
An activity (in the -ing form)	swimming, dancing, reading, smoking, drinking, studying



Non-count nouns do not use the indefinite articles *a/an*. They can, however, use the definite article *the* if what is being referred to is specific. They can also use no article if what is being referred to is general (generic) or nonspecific. Please see our page on article usage for more information.²

Incorrect use of non-specific article with a noncount noun

I learned a new vocabulary.

Correct use of specific article 'the' with a noncount noun

I learned the new vocabulary for Unit 2.

ACTIVITY: COUNT OR NON-COUNT?

Choose the correct form of the noun to complete the sentence

1. The United States is known as the land of _____(opportunity/opportunities).
2. Students have more responsibilities in _____ (college/colleges)
3. Many students have protested the hate _____ (speech/speeches) of controversial speakers.
4. Students living on _____(campus/campuses) have easier access to the Health Center and the gym.
5. Could you get some _____(paper/papers) for the printer?

ACTIVITY: SENTENCE-LEVEL EDITING

Correct any noun errors.

1. Apart from the ego that writer have, they need to be able to see the problem in their paper.
2. I think writers should not review their writing only according to their personal opinion.

² <http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/nouns>

3. She give me lots of feedbacks as a reader and told me where I should add detail and evidences. She also helped me to fix my grammars for better flow.
4. I sent the survey question to students and parents in my high school, and the result supported my hypothesis.

ACTIVITY: PARAGRAPH-LEVEL EDITING

Read the student paragraph below. Circle and edit all noun errors.

People with the same interest and aim always have plenty of topic to talk about. For instance, Andrew found a lot of friend in his basketball and boxing club as the member of each clubs had the same aim and interest even though they were from different countries and spoke different language. The other reason is that sometimes clubs may have a lot of activities that build friendships. Khou said, "My basketball club had mini-programs, such as a Big and Little Sib Connection, where the club officers match up each participants with another participants." This kind of games can remarkably improve the relationships among a student.

FUNCTIONS OF NOUNS

We have already discussed how sentence position can help you figure out part of speech. Here is some more information about nouns in sentences and their functions.

NOUNS CAN BE SUBJECTS

The **consequences** of plagiarism vary from an F on the assignment or dismissal from the university.

In the above sentence, "consequences" is the subject. Notice it is plural, so the verb "vary" must agree. If there was only *one* consequence, the verb would be "varies."

NOUN CAN BE COMPLEMENTS

Speeding tickets and fines are *consequences* of traffic laws.

In the above sentence, *consequences* is **not** the subject. "Tickets and fines" are the subject. *Consequences* is the noun *complement*, which means it comes after the *be* verb, which is like an = sign. It is just like saying:

Speeding tickets and fines = consequences of breaking traffic laws.

NOUNS CAN BE DIRECT OBJECTS

The **professor** explained the *consequences* of missing too many classes, including not passing the course.

In the above sentence, *consequences* is the direct object. This is because *explained* is a *transitive verb*, which means that it needs a noun to receive its action. *The professor explained* is not enough information. There must be a noun to answer the question we ask of transitive verbs: The professor explained *what?* *Consequences* (the direct object) completes the idea.

NOUNS CAN BE OBJECTS OF PREPOSITIONS

Some [of the *consequences*] of being unorganized are falling behind and missing the opportunity to ask the professor questions.

In the above sentence, *consequences* looks like it should be the subject, but it is already busy. It is part of the prepositional phrase *of the consequences*. A *prepositional phrase* gives more details about the word it is next to. It begins with a preposition and ends with a noun. **If a noun is part of a prepositional phrase, it can never also be the subject.**

GERUNDS AFTER CERTAIN VERBS

We sometimes use one verb after another verb. Often the second verb is in the infinitive form, for example: I *want* to eat.

But sometimes the second verb must be in gerund form, for example: I *dislike* eating.

This depends on the *first verb*. Here is a list of verbs that are usually followed by a verb in gerund form:³

Verbs Followed by a Gerund			
admit	dislike	give up	practice
appreciate	endure	can't help	put off
avoid	enjoy	imagine	report
carry on	escape	involve	resent
consider	excuse	leave off	risk
defer	face	mention	can't stand
delay	feel like	mind	suggest
deny	finish	miss	understand
detest	forgive	postpone	

She is *considering* dropping her math course.
I *can't help* stressing over this class.

Do you *feel like* taking a break?
I *can't stand* not knowing how I did on the exam.

The gerund form or the infinitive form can follow some verbs without a big change in meaning: *begin, continue, hate, intend, like, love, prefer, propose, and start*.

I like to play tennis. I like playing tennis. It started to rain. It started raining.

INFINITIVES

Infinitives, like gerunds, resemble verbs, **but they are not**. They often function as nouns, and sometimes even as adjectives and adverbs.

To sleep is the only thing Julie wants after her three midterms in one day.

To sleep is the subject of the sentence.

No matter how fascinating the biology dissection is, Emanuel turns his head and refuses to look.

To look is the direct object for the verb *refuses*.

Verbs Followed by an Infinitive		
forget	need	recommend
help	offer	allow
learn	want	can/can't afford
teach	would like	decide
train	agree	manage
choose	encourage	mean
expect	pretend	refuse
hope	promise	

³ (from: <https://www.englishclub.com/grammar/verbs-ing-form.htm>)

I forgot **to close** the window.
Is he encouraged **to learn** English?

Mary needs **to leave** early.
We can't afford **to take** a long holiday.

The infinitive form is always used after adjectives; for example: disappointed, glad, happy, pleased, relieved, sad, surprised

I was happy **to help** them study.

She will be delighted **to see** she passed.

This includes too + adjective:

The lecture was too difficult **to understand**.

Is your coffee too hot **to drink**?

The infinitive form is used after adjective + enough:

He was determined enough **to pass** the class.

She is smart enough **to score** well on the exam.

ACTIVITY: GERUND OR INFINITIVE—SENTENCES

Complete the sentence by choosing the correct form of the word in parentheses.

1. Steve enjoys _____ (to take/taking) science courses.
2. Nancy suggested _____ (to study/studying) together for the next exam.
3. Where did you learn _____ (to solve/solving) those equations?
4. Do you mind _____ (to help/helping) me revise my paper?
5. He asked _____ (to speak/speaking) to the dean.
6. You've never mentioned _____ (to live/living) in Sacramento before.
7. If she keeps _____ (to come/coming) to class late, she's not going to pass!
8. Angela plans _____ (to study/studying) abroad next year.
9. I agreed ____ (to help/helping) Jack study for the physics midterm.

ACTIVITY: INFINITIVES OR GERUNDS—PARAGRAPHS

The sentences below are from, "The Course Syllabus: Know It, Love It, Understand It, Benefit From It," by Katharine Hansen (Unit 1—Academic Reading and Vocabulary). In each blank, decide whether you would use the infinitive or the gerund form of the word in parentheses. You may go to the reading to check your answers.

1. _____ (Taking/To take) a look at the syllabus before each class will keep you from asking those questions because the answers are on the syllabus.
2. _____ (To peruse/Perusing) the syllabi of all the instructors who teach that course will give you an idea of the teaching style of each.
3. You may even want _____ (mentioning/to mention) the deficiency to the professor's department chair or dean.
4. Here is your opportunity _____ (understanding/to understand) what you can expect to get out of the course.
5. If you note overwhelming conflicts in due dates among your classes, you may want to consider _____ (dropping/to drop) the class.
6. Some professors consider the syllabus _____ (being/to be) a contract with students

ACTIVITY: ON YOUR OWN

Choose two verbs from the "Verbs Followed by a Gerund" chart and two from the "Verbs Followed by an Infinitive" chart and create your own sentences.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____
