

NOUNS

A noun is a word for a person, place, thing, quality, or idea. Nouns are the words that name the things around us. No one knows for sure, but it is likely that nouns were the first words uttered by human beings in prehistoric times: *me, you, food, fire, Republican*.

Proper and Common Nouns

There are two types of nouns: proper nouns and common nouns. A proper noun is a *specific* person, place, thing, or idea. Proper nouns include specific persons (Yang Fuyu, Stephen T. Colbert), places (Oxford, Zhejiang Province), things (East Asia Summit, Academy Award), and ideas (Existentialism, Islam). Some nouns can be either proper nouns or common nouns, depending upon whether they refer to a *specific* person, place, or thing.

ground zero (the point of detonation of a bomb)

Ground Zero (the site of the World Trade Center in New York)

mother (a woman who has a child)

Mother (a particular mother, as in “However, Mother called them ‘broad beans.’ ”)

The department chair

Ovaltine Jenkins, Chair, chemistry department

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A common noun is any noun *except* a proper noun. Said another way, common nouns name a general type of person (*doctor, librarian*), place (*country, desert*), thing (*chemical, building*), or idea (*beauty, bravery*). Here are two useful rules: First, proper nouns are virtually always capitalized, whereas common nouns are not. Second, proper nouns, being specific, are usually singular; common nouns can be either singular or plural. There is only one Mississippi River, but there can be one river or many rivers. There are many lakes, but only one Lake Michigan; however, Lake Michigan is one of the Great Lakes. “Great Lakes” is plural in construction, but there is only *one* set of Great Lakes in the world.

Keep in mind that most words derived from proper nouns are also capitalized. From the proper noun *America*, we can derive the adjective *American* and the verb *Americanize* as well as other nouns such as *Americanism* and *Americanization*.

Concrete and Abstract Nouns

It is sometimes useful to keep in mind that common nouns can be subdivided again into concrete nouns and abstract nouns. The concrete nouns are those persons, places, or things that we can detect with our five senses (e.g., *chair*, *apple*). Abstract nouns are those nouns, usually ideas or concepts, not directly detected by our senses (e.g., *peace*, *friendship*).

Collective and Mass Nouns

Two special types of common nouns are troublesome: collective nouns and mass nouns. A collective noun indicates a group or collection of countable persons, places, things, or qualities (*audience*, *committee*, *personnel*, *army*, *class*). The general rule is that such nouns are plural in meaning but singular in form:

The *audience* is restless.
The *committee* meets on Tuesdays.

Unfortunately, this rule often breaks down. Whenever the individuality of members of a group is emphasized, the plural form of the verb is used.

The *couple* do not live together.
The *committee* of scientists were from several scientific disciplines.

English for Political Studies (Intermediate Level) – Notes on Nouns in E4PS

Functions of Nouns

In sentences, nouns usually do something or something is done to them. A noun that does something is the *subject* of the sentence. If something is done to the noun, it is the *object* of a verb or of a preposition. (Remember, a preposition is a word used to relate a noun or a pronoun to some other part of the sentence.)

John prepared the media.

The proper noun *John* is the subject of the sentence; *media* is the object of the verb *prepared*.

John prepared the media in the petri dish.

Again, *John* is the subject, *media* is the object of the verb, and *petri dish* is the object of the preposition *in*.

In some sentences, nouns don't *do* anything, nor is anything done to them. Such sentences usually present definitions or characteristics of these nouns. Typically, these sentences contain some form of the linking verb *to be*.

Penicillin is an antibiotic.
Scientists are nice people.