

Handout 1/2025, Unit 1

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*.

graduate degree in microbiology
graduate degree in English

In scientific writing, it helps in many ways to keep in mind the distinction between proper and common nouns. Two frequent problems faced by scientists are the distinctions between generic names and proprietary names of manufactured products and pharmaceutical preparations, and between scientific names and common names of organisms. Here are some examples, with the proper nouns on the left and common nouns on the right.

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| Doxycycline | tetracycline |
| <i>Streptococcus</i> | streptococci |
| Augmentin | amoxicillin |
| Trypticase | soy agar |
| <i>Neisseria gonorrhoeae</i> | gonococcus |

Note that final example. *Neisseria* is capitalized because there is only one genus *Neisseria*. The species name *gonorrhoeae* is not capitalized. These proper-common distinctions do not always hold up, but they usually provide a good guideline to capitalization.

Most eponyms (names derived from people) are capitalized, but only the proper noun portion of the term is capitalized (*Gram stain, Bunsen burner*). Adjectives derived from a person’s name generally are not capitalized

(*gram-negative bacteria, mendelian*). Eventually, eponyms often enter the common domain and lose their capitals. For example, the petri dish, named after Julius R. Petri, a bacteriologist who died in 1921, is no longer capitalized.

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.

The best rule for handling collective nouns is to decide whether the *meaning* is singular or plural. Which of the following two sentences is correct?

A total of 48 petri dishes *were* in the autoclave.
A total of 48 petri dishes *was* in the autoclave.

Scientists who have a poor knowledge of English grammar would choose the verb *were*, thinking that the subject of the sentence is *dishes*. Scientists

with a good knowledge of English would choose *was*, recognizing that *dishes* is the object of a preposition and that the subject of the sentence is the singular word *total*. Scientists with an *excellent* command of English would apply the rule of meaning and would select *were*. To determine meaning, we must ask ourselves what was in the autoclave. Was it the singular “total” or was it a whole mess of petri dishes? Obviously, it was the dishes; thus, the verb *were* is correct.

Another collective noun that comes up frequently in scientific writing is *number*. Do we say “A number of test tubes is on the table”? No. Following the rule of meaning and recognizing that the plural word *tubes* is proof that more than one test tube is on the table, we say, “A number of test tubes are on the table.”

But, while following the simple rule of meaning, do not simplistically conclude that words like *total* and *number* always take plural verbs. Look at these sentences:

A number of test tubes is on the table.
The number of test tubes on the table is four.

The first example, as already stated, is wrong; the verb *are* is needed to give logical meaning. However, the word *is* in the second example is correct. Why? Because there is only one number, “four.” Actually, the distinction here is caused by the difference between the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a* (see Chapter 9).

Another confusing type of noun is the mass noun. A mass noun is a concrete noun that represents a mass rather than countable units. Mass nouns are singular; many do not have plurals (*air, water, wheat*).

One of the most common grammatical errors is the misuse of the mass noun *amount* in place of the word *number*. “An amount of people” is poor English, because people are countable individuals. We should say “The number of people on the elevator is nine.” (Conceivably, we could weigh the people on the elevator. Then it would be correct to say “The amount of people on the elevator was 1,400 pounds.”)

A related problem is the choice between *fewer* and *less*. We use *less* to modify nouns that can't be counted, and we use *fewer* to modify a noun with countable units.

There is *less* liquid in this test tube.

There are *fewer* specimens in that container.

Years ago, jazz guitarist Les Paul was invited to play a concert for Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany. He felt uncomfortable about it, so he took along a friend, Les Jenkins. Les Paul arrived at the concert hall before Les Jenkins, and discovered that Hitler wasn't there because he had gone to meet with Mussolini. So the question is, in the end, were there less Leses or fewer fuhrers?

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.

(excerpt from DAY Robert A. e Nancy SAKADUSKI, 2011:
*Scientific English: A Guide for Scientists and
Other Professionals*, Greenwood Pub Group)