

Chapter 3

The noun

The *subject* of a sentence is the *noun*. Take this sentence, for example:

Michael is a very good name.

The subject of the sentence – who or what the sentence is about – is shown in bold letters. It is a *noun*.

SECTION 3.1 - TYPES OF NOUNS

There are many types of nouns.

Proper nouns

The first letter of a *proper noun* is written using a *capital* letter. Proper nouns represent a *particular* thing, rather than just a general thing. For instance, people's names start with a capital letter, because they represent the name of a particular person. Other common proper nouns are the days of the week, names of cities, countries, and organisations.

Common nouns

The opposite of a proper noun is a *common noun*. These are nouns that don't represent specific people or things, but just people or things in general. For instance, if we were talking about a fire-fighter named Bob, we could say something like:

Common
Noun
 {
Bob is a good firefighter
 {
 Proper
Noun

Because 'Bob' refers to a specific person, it is a proper noun and starts with a capital 'B'. The noun 'fire-fighter', however is a *common* noun, because it represents people who fight fires – but not a specific person.

Common nouns can, however, be used as proper nouns. For instance, the noun 'foundation' is normally just a common noun. But if you use it in a sentence like this, it becomes a proper noun:

I like the Andre Agassi Charity Foundation.

Plural nouns

One day when I'm at the park, there might be one dog there. The next day there might be more than one dog. Here's how I could describe the park each day:

Yesterday I saw a dog at the park.

Today I saw many dogs at the park.

In the first sentence, I'm using the *singular noun* – 'dog'. In the second sentence, I'm using the *plural noun* – 'dogs'. I made the singular noun 'dog' into a plural noun by adding 's' to the end of it. Most nouns can be made into plurals by adding an 's' to the end. But there are some exceptions:

There is one country with a larger population than India.

There are many countries with smaller populations than India.

For some nouns that end in 'y', you need to ditch the 'y' and then add 'ies' to make them into plural nouns.

After I ran yesterday I had a sore calf.

After I ran today I had sore calves.

For some nouns that end in 'f', ditch the 'f' and add 'ves' to make them plural.

I have one potato.

He has many potatoes.

Some nouns that end in 'o' need an 'es' added to them to make them plural (they keep the 'o' though).

I have one cactus in my garden

The desert has a lot of cacti.

Some nouns that end with 'us' replace the 'us' with 'i' to become plural.

My uncle has one sheep on his farm
My grandmother has lots of sheep on her farm.

Sometimes exactly the same word is used for both the singular *and* the plural form of the noun.

There is only one man over here.
There are many men over there.

The hardest nouns to change into plurals are those that form their *irregularly*. For instance, *man* becomes *men*, *woman* becomes *women* and *tooth* becomes *teeth*. A very common mistake is made with the words ‘dice’ and ‘die’. ‘Die’ is the *singular* form; ‘dice’ is the *plural* form. So you’re either rolling *one die* or *two dice* when you’re playing Monopoly!

Concrete nouns

Nouns that represent something you can *perceive* through one of your five physical senses are known as *concrete nouns*. These nouns represent something concrete that you can physically *touch* or *hear*, for instance. The five senses are sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. ‘Tree’, ‘door’, ‘cat’, ‘basketball’, and ‘road’ are all examples of concrete nouns.

Abstract nouns

So if we have concrete nouns, we also need to have the opposite of them – *abstract nouns*. These are nouns representing things that you *can’t* perceive through any of your five senses. Any sentence about emotions usually involves abstract nouns. Here are a couple of sentences with abstract nouns (in bold font):

There is a lot of **love** in that relationship.
Johnson had never felt so much **hate** before.

SECTION 3.2 - COLLECTIVE NOUNS

These are nouns that represent a group of more than one thing. The *collective noun* in this sentence is highlighted in bold font:

My uncle owns a **flock** of sheep.

One of the most common uses of collective nouns is to describe groups of various types of animals. Some of the names used to describe groups of animals are very weird. Here are some of them:

Group name	Animals used with
Herd	Buffalo, cattle, deer, donkeys, elephants, horses, kangaroos, pigs
Destruction	Feral cats

Pod	Whales, dolphins, seals
Nest	Vipers, snakes
Ambush	Tigers
Muster	Storks, peacocks
Host	Sparrows
Murder	Crows
Crash	Rhinoceros
Litter	Pups, pigs, cubs, dogs, kittens
Shoal	Most types of fish
Flock	Most types of birds, sheep
Pride	Lions
Brood	Hens, chickens
Colony	Ants, beavers, penguins, frogs, rabbits
Swarm	Bees, flies, rats
Convocation	Eagles
Kine	Cows
Sloth	Bears
Culture	Bacteria
Shrewdness	Apes

SECTION 3.3 - POSSESSIVE NOUNS

Singular possessive nouns

When you want to indicate to the reader that the thing described by one noun *owns* something else you can turn it into a *possessive noun*. This is usually achieved by adding an *apostrophe* and the letter ‘s’ to the end of the noun. Take this simple sentence for

example:

I saw Bob's dog the other day.

Normally, the name Bob is a proper noun. But in this sentence we want to talk about the dog that is *owned* by Bob. We can do this by adding an apostrophe and an 's' to the end of 'Bob'. This is an example of a *singular* possessive noun – there is only *one* Bob who owns the dog.

When the noun that you're trying to change into a possessive noun already ends with an 's', you can do one of two things. You can just add an apostrophe, or you can add an apostrophe and another 's'. If the noun we're trying to change is 'class', here's the two ways:

The class' average mark was very good.

The class's average mark was very good.

Often, one way will look a lot better than the other way, although you won't always be able to say exactly why this is so – just go with the one which you think looks better. One thing that will help you is remembering that if a word ends in a silent 's' or an 'x', add both an apostrophe *and* an 's' to make it possessive. For instance, the word 'bass', which is pronounced 'base' (at least when you're talking about music), ends with an 'e' sound, not an 's' sound – the last 's' is silent. So add an apostrophe *and* an 's' to make it possessive:

The double bass's sound is very deep and soothing.

Plural possessive nouns

Say we're dealing with the noun 'dog'. What if we want to talk about the masters of more than one dog at once? We'd have to say something like:

The dogs' masters were all present at the dog training school.

When we want to make a *plural noun* like 'dogs' into a *possessive noun*, we just add an apostrophe after the 's'.

If the plural form of the noun does *not* already have an 's' at its end, then we can add an apostrophe followed by an 's', like this:

The men's tennis tour is not watched by as many people as the women's tour.

Both 'men' and 'women' are plural nouns, that don't end in 's'. So when we make them into *plural possessive nouns*, we add both an apostrophe and an 's'.

Handy Hint #1 - The difference between the possessive and the descriptive

Fathers Day and Mothers Day are the cause of many arguments. Not because people don't know what to get their parents, but because no-one knows for sure how to write it. Here are the three options:

Fathers Day

Father's Day

Fathers' Day

So which option is correct? Well, everyone has an opinion, and there are arguments that can be made for any of the three options. However, here's my take on the whole thing.

First of all, let's compare the last two options:

- *Father's Day* means that the day belongs to *one* father, since the apostrophe is before the 's'.
- *Fathers' Day* means that the day belongs to all fathers as a group, because the apostrophe is after the 's'.

Personally, out of those two choices, I prefer the second one – 'Fathers' Day'. I think the day belongs to all fathers around the world, although you will probably celebrate it with just your father. Unless you're one of those people who think it's all a commercial ploy to generate greeting card and product sales!

And then we come to the option without any apostrophe at all – 'Fathers Day'. I like this option best. When you write it this way you're saying that this is a day *for fathers*, not a day *owned by fathers*. If you like this logic, then you can also apply it to some other words; for instance, the names of schools, like my high school:

Brisbane Boys Grammar School

Because it's a school *for* boys, you don't need to put an apostrophe before or after the 's' in 'boys'.

SECTION 3.4 - COMPOUNDED NOUNS THAT ARE POSSESSIVE

A *compound noun* is made up of two nouns joined by a conjunction, like 'and'. For instance, 'John and Mary' is an example of a compound noun made up of the two nouns 'John' and 'Mary'. There are two situations you need to deal with when you form possessives out of compounded nouns:

- When each of the nouns in the compound noun owns their *own thing*, then you need to turn each of the nouns into a possessive noun.

- When all of the nouns in the compound noun *together* own the thing, then you only need to change the last noun into a possessive noun.

So when each noun owns its own thing:

The fireman's and policeman's faces were covered in dust.

The fireman owns a face. The policeman also owns a face (different to the fireman's).

When the nouns share ownership of something:

Mum and Dad's business is going well.

The business is a thing that is owned by both Mum and Dad, so we only change the last noun in the compounded noun into the possessive form.

Double possessives

Sometimes, it seems like you *double up* in indicating who or what is owned by something else. Compare these two sentences:

The boy was scared by the memories of his grandfather's.

The boy was scared by the memories of his grandfather.

The first sentence is talking about the memories that his grandfather has of something, which the grandfather is probably telling the boy about. The memories are *owned by* the grandfather.

In the second sentence, the memories are not owned by the grandfather. They are someone else's memories of the grandfather. Perhaps the boy is being told some scary things about what other people remember about his grandfather.

The first sentence is an example of a *double possessive construction*. It has two ownership parts stacked on top of each other. The 'of' part indicates one ownership, and "grandfather's" indicates another ownership – there's *double possession*.

In the second sentence, the phrase 'of his grandfather' is an *adjectival phrase* that tells us more information about the noun 'memories'.

Handy Hint #2 - Mixing up it's and its

It's and *its* have two different meanings.

It's

Usually when you have an *apostrophe* followed by an 's', it means that the word is a *possessive* word and it owns something. Not so with this word, however. When you see *it's*, it is actually a shortening of the words 'it is':

*I wonder if **it is** alive?*



*I wonder if **it's** alive?*

Its

‘Its’, on the other hand, is the *possessive* form of the word ‘it’. ‘Its’ is a *possessive pronoun*. So use this form when you’re talking about what ‘it’ owns:

I am surprised at its size.