

# Chapter 1

## NOUN: PERSON, PLACE, THING, IDEA, OR ACTIVITY

### CHAPTER CHECK-IN

- Identify proper nouns and gerunds
- Use collective nouns to identify groups
- Understand singular and plural nouns
- Use possessive nouns to show ownership
- Make nouns and verbs agree

**A** noun is a part of speech that names a person, place, thing, idea, or activity. Some nouns are specific for people, places, or events; and some represent groups or collections. Some nouns aren't even technically labeled nouns as their part of speech; they're verbs acting like nouns in sentences.

Nouns can be singular, referring to one thing, or plural, referring to more than one thing. Nouns can be possessive, indicating ownership or a close relationship. Regardless of the type, nouns should always agree with their verbs in sentences. Use singular verbs with singular nouns and plural verbs with plural nouns. You have to know how a noun works in order to write an effective sentence.

### Proper Nouns

If a noun names a specific person or place, or a particular event or group, it is called a **proper noun** and is always capitalized. Some examples are *Pierre Trudeau*, *Niagara Falls*, *Dracula*, *the Canadian Security Intelligence Service*, *the Great Depression*.

Unfortunately, some writers assign proper-noun status indiscriminately to words, sprinkling capital letters freely throughout their writing. For example, the *Manhattan Project* is correctly capitalized because it is a historic project, the name given to the specific wartime effort to design and build the first nuclear weapons. But the common noun *project* should not be capitalized when referring to a club's project to clean up the campus, for example. Similarly, the *Great Depression* should be capitalized because it refers to the specific period of economic failure that began with the stock market collapse in 1929. When the word *depression* refers to other economic hard times, however, it is not a proper noun; it is a common noun and should not be capitalized.

Some flexibility in capitalizing nouns is acceptable. A writer may have a valid reason for capitalizing a particular term. For example, some companies have style guides that dictate capital letters for job titles such as *manager*. But often the capitalization beyond the basic guidelines is an effort to give a word an air of importance, and you should avoid it.

## Verbs Used as Nouns

Sometimes in English, a verb is used as a noun. When the verb form is altered and it serves the same function as a noun in the sentence, it is called a **gerund**.

### Gerunds

A noun created from the *-ing* form of a verb can act as a subject or an object in a sentence.

*Sleeping* sometimes serves as an escape from *studying*.

The gerunds *sleeping* and *studying* are *-ing* forms of the verbs *sleep* and *study*. *Sleeping* is a noun functioning as the subject of this sentence, and *studying* is a noun functioning as an object (in this case, the object of a preposition; see Chapter 5, "Connecting Words and Phrases: Prepositions, Conjunctions, and Interjections").

### Problem gerunds

Gerunds can sometimes be difficult to use correctly in a sentence. What problems can you have with gerunds?

When a noun or pronoun precedes a gerund, use the possessive case of the noun or pronoun. (For the possessive case of the pronoun, see Chapter 3, “Pronoun: Word Used in Place of a Noun.”)

*Jana’s sleeping* was sometimes an escape from studying.

To test for correct usage, substitute the noun in place of the gerund. For example, in the preceding sentence, replace the gerund *sleeping* with the noun *slumber*. Read these sentences aloud and listen for the difference.

*Jana’s slumber* was sometimes an escape from studying.

NOT *Jana slumber* was sometimes an escape from studying.

Even when you think that the word before the gerund looks like an object, use the possessive case.

Jana was annoyed by *Bill’s studying*.

NOT Jana was annoyed by *Bill studying*.

## Collective Nouns

A word that stands for a group of things is called a **collective noun**. In fact, the word *group* itself is a collective noun. Here are a few others: *family, club, team, committee, staff, furniture, jury, Senate, audience, herd*.

Usually these nouns are treated as singular because the emphasis is on the action of the entire unit rather than its individual parts.

The *team is* going on the bus.

The *committee wants* to find a solution to the problem.

But when you want to emphasize the individual parts of a group, you may treat a collective noun as plural.

The *team have* argued about going on the bus.

The *committee want* different solutions to the problem.

If the plural sounds awkward, try rewording.

The *team members have* argued about going on the bus.

The *committee members want* different solutions to the problem.

## Singular and Plural Nouns

The term **number** refers to whether a noun is singular or plural. Most nouns can be either singular or plural, depending on whether you are talking about one thing or more than one. You know the basic rule of adding *-s* to make the plural of a noun (*one cat, three cats*), and you also know that many nouns don't follow that rule—for example, *sheep* (singular), *sheep* (plural); *enemy, enemies*; *wharf, wharves*; *hero, heroes*; *goose, geese*, and so on. Check a dictionary if you're not sure how to spell a plural noun. Do not add an apostrophe + *s* to a singular form to make it plural, even if the noun is a family name: *the Taylors*, not *the Taylor's*; *donkeys*, not *donkey's*; *taxis*, not *taxi's*.

The singular and plural forms of some nouns with Latin and Greek endings can cause trouble. The noun *data*, for example, is plural; *datum* is the singular form. Although today the plural *data* is widely used as a singular noun, you should keep the distinction, particularly in scientific writing.

The final *datum* (singular) is not consistent with the preceding *data* (plural), which *are* positive.

Here are some examples of Latin and Greek singular and plural words that can be troublesome: *bacterium, bacteria*; *criterion, criteria*; *medium, media*; *alumnus* (masculine singular), *alumni* (masculine plural), *alumna* (feminine singular), *alumnae* (feminine plural).

## Possessive Case of Nouns

The **possessive case** of a noun is used to show ownership (*Jordan's car, my sister's house*) or other close relationship (*the president's friends, the university's position*).

### Problems with possessives

Sometimes possessives can cause problems. Do I add an *'s* or just an apostrophe? Follow this rule: For singular nouns, add *'s*, even if the noun ends in an *-s* or *-z* sound: *dog's, house's, Wes's, Jesus's, Denver's, Keats's*.

For most plural possessive nouns, add an apostrophe alone: *several months' bills, many Romanians' apartments, the encyclopedias' differences*. If a plural noun doesn't end in *-s*, add *-s*, just as you would with a singular noun: *women's issues, mice's tails*.

## Switching to an *of* construction

When a possessive noun sounds awkward, reword to use an *of* construction. This is a better way to indicate the relationship, especially when referring to an inanimate object: *the top of the page* instead of *the page's top*; *the lawn of the building on the corner* instead of *the building on the corner's lawn*; *the main characters of Pride and Prejudice* instead of *Pride and Prejudice's main characters*; *the novels of Dickens* instead of *Dickens's novels*.

## Joint ownership

One last word about possessive nouns: When you are indicating joint ownership, use the possessive form in the final name only, such as *Abbott and Costello's movies*; *Tom and Dawn's dinner party*; *Smith, Wilson, and Nelson's partnership*.

## Agreement of Nouns and Verbs

**Agreement** is an important concept in grammar and a source of many writing errors. It will come up again under pronouns (Chapter 3) and under sentence construction (Chapter 7, “Common Sentence Errors”).

Nouns must agree with their verbs, which means that a singular noun requires a singular verb, and a plural noun requires a plural verb.

The *rabbit jumps* up and down. (singular)

The *rabbits jump* up and down. (plural)

Remember that a noun ending in *-s* is often a plural, whereas a verb ending in *-s* is usually singular: four *home runs* (plural noun); he *runs fast* (singular verb).

Nouns with Latin or Greek endings and nouns that look plural but sometimes take singular verbs can cause agreement problems.

In the following example, *criteria* is plural. Use the plural form of the verb (*are*).

The *criteria* for judging an entry *are* listed in the brochure.

*Rights*, which is a plural form, is treated as singular in the following example because *human rights* is a unit, a single issue of concern.

*Human rights* is an issue that affects everyone.

To emphasize the rights individually, use the plural verb.

*Human rights are* ignored in many countries.

In the next example, *metres* is the plural form, but *fifty metres* is used to identify a single unit of distance and therefore takes a singular verb.

*Fifty metres is* not such a long distance.

*Statistics* looks plural, and in many situations is treated as plural. In the first example below, *statistics* refers to a subject of study, so the singular verb is appropriate.

*Statistics is* a subject I want to avoid.

*Statistics are* being gathered to show that women are better drivers than men.

Among other frequently used nouns that can take either a singular or plural verb, depending on whether the emphasis is on a single unit or individual items, are *number*, *majority*, and *minority*.

The *number* of people coming *is* surprising.

A *number* of people *are* coming.

A *number* like five thousand *is* what he had in mind.

With *number*, use this rule. If *number* is preceded by *the*, always use the singular verb. If *number* is preceded by *a*, use the singular or plural, depending on whether you are describing a single unit or individual items.

With *majority* and *minority*, the key is to decide whether you want to emphasize individual people or things or the single unit.

The *majority is* opposed to the measure. (singular = single unit)

A *minority* of the younger people *refuse* to concede the point.  
(plural = individuals)

## Chapter Checkout

- Identify the underlined nouns in the following sentences as common or proper nouns.
  - Dylan plans to go to university in the fall.
  - Sara was accepted to Carleton University.
- Identify the underlined nouns in the following sentences as a collective noun, singular noun, or a gerund.
  - The commission plans to review the report.
  - Running is fun.
  - My coach is great.
  - The company established a strict dress code.
- Match the underlined nouns with the corresponding term that best describes the type of noun.
 

a. My <u>dog's</u> bone was lost.	singular noun
b. The <u>women</u> meet for lunch.	singular possessive noun
c. My <u>sons'</u> cars need to be washed.	plural noun
d. A <u>girl</u> lost her scarf on the bus.	plural possessive noun
- Fill in the blank with the correct form of the verb to make the noun and verb agree in the following sentences.
  - Margaret and Tommy \_\_\_\_\_ happy. (look, looks)
  - Neither Patrick nor Alex \_\_\_\_\_ the answer. (know, knows)
  - John, as well as Ali and Griffin, \_\_\_\_\_ to visit Charlottetown. (plan, plans)
  - Many components of the company's computer system \_\_\_\_\_ badly outmoded. (are, is)
  - The danger of scuba diving \_\_\_\_\_ not discourage Lily. (do, does)
  - While wearing her school uniform, Tessie \_\_\_\_\_ for charity. (dance, dances)

## Answers

- a.** common; **b.** proper
- a.** collective; **b.** gerund; **c.** singular; **d.** collective
- a.** singular possessive; **b.** plural; **c.** plural possessive; **d.** singular
- a.** look; **b.** knows; **c.** plans; **d.** are; **e.** does; **f.** dances