

NOUNS

The first real word you ever used probably was a noun—a word like *mama*, *daddy*, *car*, or *cookie*. Most children begin building their vocabularies with nouns. A noun names something: a person, place, or thing. Most other parts of our language either describe nouns, tell what a noun is doing, or take the place of a noun.

Nouns have these characteristics:

- They are **abstract** or **concrete**.
- They are **proper** or **common**.
- Most are **singular** or **plural**, but...
- Some are **collective**.

In English, nouns are often preceded by *noun markers*—the articles/adjectives *a*, *an*, *the*, or *some* for example; or possessive words like *my* or *your*. A noun always follows a noun marker, though adjectives or other words may come between them:

my former roommate

a sunny June day

an objective and very thorough evaluation

some existential angst

Because of their noun markers, you could safely guess that *roommate*, *day*, *evaluation* and *angst* are nouns (even if you didn't know what *angst* was). Although not all nouns are preceded by markers, you can use a noun marker test to identify many, including abstract nouns. Consider this example:

Enthusiasm and willingness to work hard are a remedy for the existential angst of many students.

Remedy is marked as a noun by the noun marker *a*. *Angst* is preceded by the noun marker *the*. *Students* is preceded by the adjective (adjectives modify nouns) *many*. **Test the remaining words: can you have *an enthusiasm* or *some enthusiasm*?** Certainly: "I have *an enthusiasm* for snowboarding" or "Show *some enthusiasm*!" So *enthusiasm* is a noun. Can you have *an and* or *some and*? Uh, no. So *and* is not a noun. Can you have *a willingness* or *some willingness*? Sure, you can have "a willingness to learn"; *willingness* is also a noun.

Every noun is either **abstract** or **concrete**.

Nouns like *enthusiasm*, *willingness* and *angst* are abstract nouns. **Abstract nouns name things we cannot see, touch, or detect readily through our senses.** Abstract nouns name ideas (*existentialism*, *democracy*), measurements (*weight*, *percent*), emotions (*love*, *angst*), or qualities (*responsibility*). **Concrete nouns**, on the other hand, name persons, including animals (*cousins*, *Roger Rabbit*), places (*beach*, *Paris*), or things we can see, touch, or otherwise detect through our senses (*smoke*, *french fries*).

Every noun is either **proper** or **common**.

A **proper noun** identifies a *particular person, animal, place, thing, or idea*--*Roger Rabbit*, for example. **The first letter of each word of a proper noun is capitalized.**

A **common noun** does not name a particular person or thing; rather, it refers to a whole class or type. **Common nouns do not require capitalization.**

**Proper noun
(capitalized)**

**common
noun**

Coke

is his favorite

soft drink.

The Rooks and the Rangers

*are our local soccer and
baseball* ***teams.***

Bidwell Park

*is one of the largest
municipal* ***parks.***

Lundberg Family Farm

is a sustainable, organic ***farm.***

Most nouns are either **singular** or **plural**...

Most nouns are made plural with the addition of *s* or *es*. Thus, *instructor* becomes *instructors*, and *class* becomes *classes*. Some nouns have irregular plural forms: *man* becomes *men*, and *woman* becomes *women*. *Child* becomes *children*, and *person* becomes *people*.

Many people, both men and women, believe that having children will be a remedy for their existential angst.

Some nouns have the same form in both singular and plural: "A *moose* is crossing the river. No, wait--*three moose* are crossing the river!"

...but some nouns are collective.

A *collective* noun names a collection or group of things. Although a collective noun refers to a group of many things, it is usually singular in form. We think of a collective noun as singular because its members act in one accord:

The army is withdrawing from those Asian countries that are in negotiations.

Here, *army* is a collective noun referring to a group of many people acting with one will. We treat it as a singular noun. *Countries* is a plural noun. If several countries joined together to form an alliance, we could say this:

The Asian alliance is united in its determination to repel foreign invaders.

In some instances a collective noun describes a group that is not acting with one will, whose members rather are taking independent, divergent actions. In this case, the collective noun is treated as a plural to reflect the plurality of the members' actions:

The jury were unable to come to any consensus.

If the jury had reached a unanimous decision, we would have said:

The jury was unanimous in its verdict.