




The Key to English

Nouns

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES

the key to english



Nouns

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Preface

This book is intended as an aid in self-study or as supplementary material in regular language classes. Its purpose is to review and codify for the intermediate to advanced student of English the main facts about English nouns—their form and their syntax.

Nouns are one of the two most numerous classes of words in the English language, the other being verbs. Their main role, of course, is to name *things*—objects, people, animals, places, substances, and all the rest. As such, their number is as great as the number of such things that speakers want to talk about. Nouns, therefore are a very “productive” word class; new ones are readily coined, and old ones become obsolete and pass away. For this reason, the student must not expect to find any “key” to the *meaning* of English nouns in this book. Their number is much too vast for that.

The grammar of nouns—their forms and the ways they are used in sentences—can be presented, however. The first lessons in this book deal with the various kinds of nouns and their forms. Then we present the personal pronouns, which modern grammarians usually treat as a special subclass of nouns rather than as a separate “part of speech.” Next comes the category called “substitute nouns”—words like *other*, *one*, *this*, *few*, *some*—which have traditionally been called pronouns but which are really about halfway between pronouns and nouns. Like pronouns, they acquire their referential meaning from an antecedent noun; like nouns, they can be preceded in many cases by noun-determiners, adjectives, possessives, and other modifiers, and many of them can also be inflected. At this point we present the matter of the “echoing” of nouns and noun constructions by pronouns and other substitute expressions.

The syntax of nouns is presented in the next few lessons, and these are followed by a study of noun clauses, noun

compounds, noun-forming derivational suffixes, and, finally, certain structures that are not nouns but which behave like nouns in sentences.

Each lesson consists of an expository section, with examples, followed by drills and exercises of various types. Answers to the exercises, when the latter are such that "right" answers exist, are given at the end of the book.

We cannot, of course, make any claim to have presented "English nouns" in this book, or even a reasonable sampling of them. We have, however, made an effort to include all the function words that work with nouns and are so crucial in understanding the meaning of English sentences. The student can easily learn the referential meaning of a noun that is unfamiliar to him; what he may not be able to find readily in ordinary reference books is the meaning of the structure in which it is used. For a more thoroughgoing study of noun modifiers, the student should consult *The Key to English Adjectives 1* and *2*; for word study and vocabulary building, *The Key to English Vocabulary*; and, for idioms not mentioned in this book, *The Key to English Figurative Expressions*.

This book is one of *The Key to English* series, prepared for the Collier-Macmillan English Program by the Materials Development Staff of English Language Services, Inc., under the co-direction of Edwin T. Cornelius, Jr., and Willard D. Sheeler. It was written by Earle W. Brockman, with the collaboration of Sara Withers and George F. Sheldon.

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LESSON ONE

What Is a Noun?

The traditional definition of a noun is "the name of a person, place, or thing." In addition to this, we can say that a noun in English is a word that (1) can be inflected for the *plural* and the *possessive* and (2) can be put in certain positions in the sentence. We will make these statements clearer in the discussion that follows.

Singular and Plural in English

In English, every noun automatically has what is called *number*. The requirements of English grammar are such that a speaker of English is forced to indicate whether he is talking about *one* of a number of things or *more than one*. *One* is indicated by the *singular*, and *more than one* by the *plural*. The overwhelming majority of nouns in English form their plural by the addition of one of three endings, determined by the last sound in the singular form. (In spelling, these endings are written either *-s* or *-es*.) (For irregular plurals, see Lesson 2.)

The ending is /s/ (like the first sound in the word *sit*) if the final sound in the singular is /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, or /θ/ (the last symbol representing the first sound in *think*). Remember, we are not talking about spelling, but *sound*. Study these examples:

| | | |
|-------|-----------------|--------|
| lip | final sound /p/ | lips |
| cot | final sound /t/ | cots |
| lake | final sound /k/ | lakes |
| laugh | final sound /f/ | laughs |
| month | final sound /θ/ | months |

2 What Is a Noun?

If the final sound of the singular is one of those listed below, the plural ending is /iz/, and the plural has one more syllable than the singular.

| | | |
|---------|-----------------|---------|
| glass | final sound /s/ | glasses |
| phrase | final sound /z/ | phrases |
| leash | final sound /ʃ/ | leashes |
| porch | final sound /č/ | porches |
| judge | final sound /ǵ/ | judges |
| garage* | final sound /ž/ | garages |

All other words, that is, all words ending in vowels or in consonants other than those we have named so far, form their plural by adding the sound /z/. Study these examples, but remember that they do not represent all of the possibilities.

| | | |
|-------|-----------------|--------|
| rib | final sound /b/ | ribs |
| pod | final sound /d/ | pod |
| log | final sound /g/ | logs |
| pill | final sound /l/ | pills |
| room | final sound /m/ | rooms |
| sin | final sound /n/ | sins |
| ring | final sound /ŋ/ | rings |
| bear | final sound /r/ | bears |
| lathe | final sound /ð/ | lathes |
| wave | final sound /v/ | waves |

Final sound a vowel:

| | |
|------|-------|
| sea | seas |
| day | days |
| lie | lies |
| law | laws |
| due | dues |
| sofa | sofas |

In Lesson 3, we will deal with *mass nouns*, that is, nouns that refer to shapeless substances and nouns that are grammatically assimilated to the mass noun category.

* Said with the same final sound as in French. This sound does not occur in final position in native English words, but it is often heard in words of foreign origin.

Noun Determiners

Noun determiners are a special class of expressions in English whose grammatical function is to signal that a noun follows. They have meaning, too, of course. Some of them are absolutely reliable signals that the next word, or one of the next few words, in the sentence will be a noun. Such expressions as *the*, *a* or *an*, *my*, *your*, *our*, and *lots of* are *always* followed by nouns. Thus, we can be sure that a word following one of these expressions *must* be a noun (unless it is an adjective preceding a noun, but one of the next few words will be a noun). There is no such English sentence as *I have the*, or *They don't have my*. If we say *I have the kree*, and if we assume that we have spoken a grammatical sentence, *kree* must be a noun, even though it has no meaning. The fact that it follows *the* makes it a noun.

A complete list of noun determiners is given in the table on this page. For a fuller discussion of this kind of noun modifier, the student is referred to *The Key to English Adjectives I*, Lesson 11.

NOUN DETERMINERS CLASSIFIED ACCORDING TO THE TYPE OF NOUN THAT MAY FOLLOW

| Any kind of noun | Mass nouns or singular count nouns | Singular count nouns | Mass nouns | Mass nouns or plural count nouns | Plural nouns |
|------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| the | this | a(n) | much | some | these |
| my | that | each | (a) little | more | those |
| your | | every | a good | most | many |
| her | | either | deal of | all (the) | (a) few |
| its | | neither | a great | a lot of | several |
| our | | one | deal of | lots of | two, three, |
| their | | another† | | other | <i>etc.</i> |
| which | | many a | | enough | both (the) |
| what | | | | | |
| whose | | | | | |
| whichever | | | | | |
| whatever | | | | | |
| no | | | | | |
| some* | | | | | |
| any | | | | | |

* Stressed, not expressing quantity

† May precede plural noun if numeral intervenes: *another five dollars*.

Characteristic Positions of Nouns in the Sentence

Here are some typical sentence patterns, in which the only kind of word that can fill the blank is a noun:

The _____ sings. *(between a noun determiner and a verb)*

I saw a _____. *(following a noun determiner)*

He works with _____. *(following a preposition)*

See also Lesson 5 on the grammar of nouns in the sentences.

Word Drill

Say these nouns, first in the singular and then in the plural. In the first group, the plurals have the sound /s/; in the second group, they have the sound /z/; in the third group they have the sound /iz/; and, in the fourth group, they are mixed.

Group 1: Plurals in /s/

| | | | |
|--------|---------|-------|--------|
| wrap | wraps | youth | youths |
| brick | bricks | map | maps |
| kit | kits | light | lights |
| belief | beliefs | book | books |
| clock | clocks | month | months |

Group 2: Plurals in /z/

| | | | |
|------|-------|--------|---------|
| pie | pies | room | rooms |
| robe | robes | rain | rains |
| fad | fads | string | strings |
| bag | bags | bear | bears |
| girl | girls | cove | coves |

Group 3: Plurals in /iz/

| | | | |
|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| beach | beaches | peach | peaches |
| crash | crashes | dash | dashes |
| glass | glasses | boss | bosses |
| ditch | ditches | loss | losses |
| wedge | wedges | patch | patches |

Group 4

| | | | |
|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| rose | roses | look | looks |
| shoe | shoes | cloud | clouds |
| cow | cows | mass | masses |
| fight | fight | sky | skies |
| chair | chairs | club | clubs |

Exercises

A. List each noun and noun determiner in the paragraph below.

The store on the corner of Fourth and Market Streets is famous for its excellent collection of various kinds of honey. There is honey from all parts of the world, made from many different varieties of flowers. Experts say that it is easy to tell the difference between, for example, honey made in Sicily and honey made in California. They say that there is an unmistakable difference in flavor, because of the different sorts of nectar used by the bees.

B. Below are some lines from a famous nonsense poem by Lewis Carroll. Although the words are not real, you can tell which words are nouns by the noun determiners, the inflectional endings, and the position of the words in the sentences. Using these clues,* list each noun. The italicized words are verbs.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
 Did gyre and gimple in the wabe:
 All mimsy were the borogoves,
 And the mome raths *outgrabe*.

* We will assume here that *mome*, *slithy*, and *brillig* are adjectives; as we shall see later in Lesson 12, *mome* and *brillig* could very well be nouns, and *mome raths* a noun-noun compound.

C. Below are some sentences which use some nouns that you may not know. Without using your dictionary, list each noun. Write S beside it if it is singular, and P if it is plural.

1. The zither is a musical instrument which is played with a plectrum.
2. The viceroy was accused of subversion.
3. The sheriff confiscated all the illegal firearms.
4. Gourmets say that caviar is a great delicacy.
5. A carat is a unit of weight for precious stones; an emerald weighing eighty carats would be very impressive.

D. By testing the numbered words in the pattern sentence (not all words will fit in all sentences), decide which words are nouns, and write N beside them.

Pattern Sentences

The _____ is moving.

I saw a _____.

I was surprised at the _____.

His _____ is lost.

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| _____ 1. bird | _____ 7. quickly |
| _____ 2. hat | _____ 8. before |
| _____ 3. boy | _____ 9. terrier |
| _____ 4. car | _____ 10. business |
| _____ 5. charming | _____ 11. building |
| _____ 6. go | _____ 12. sad |

E. Change the italicized nouns in the sentences below to the plural forms. Be sure you know how to say the plurals. Make any other changes that are necessary in the sentence.

1. Lester didn't find the *class* very interesting.
2. He didn't think the science *building* at the college was very well equipped.
3. Their *dog* is quite fierce, and the *girl* was afraid to go into their yard.

4. Put the dirty *dish* in the sink, and the clean *glass* in the cupboard.
5. My good *suit* is at the dry cleaner's.
6. I'd like to read that *book* in your *bookcase*.
7. I like the *design* of the *chair*, but I don't like the *price*.
8. The *typewriter* in the *office* is old.
9. The *bird* was singing in the *tree* just outside my *window*.
10. James was telling us about the rare *stamp* that he had found on an old *letter*.

F. Complete the sentences below with appropriate nouns.

1. We were watching a good _____ on TV last night.
2. He used to have a _____, didn't he?
3. _____ are more interesting to me than _____.
4. Bob got a new _____ today.
5. They went to Europe by _____.
6. The main agricultural products of my country are _____ and _____.
7. This room is furnished with a _____, two _____ and a _____.
8. The teacher was trying to explain the _____ to the _____.
9. The _____ was blue and the _____ was green.
10. Her mother advised her not to buy any _____.

G. Write the plural of each of the nouns below, and then indicate whether it has the sound /s/, /z/, or /iz/.

- | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| 1. speech | 6. number | 11. pillow | 16. mirage |
| 2. part | 7. dialect | 12. rope | 17. moss |
| 3. presentation | 8. vowel | 13. key | 18. tuba |
| 4. sound | 9. porch | 14. desk | 19. race |
| 5. system | 10. mistake | 15. fox | 20. egg |

LESSON TWO

Irregular Nouns and the Possessive Case

Nouns with Irregular Plurals

Not all nouns in English form their plurals in the regular way. Here are some of the more important exceptions.

1. Nouns whose plurals sound different from the singular, and nouns whose plurals end in *-n*:

| | | | |
|-------|----------|-------|-------|
| child | children | louse | lice |
| ox | oxen | mouse | mice |
| foot | feet | man | men |
| goose | geese | woman | women |
| tooth | teeth | | |

2. Nouns ending in the sound /f/ which change the /f/ to /v/ and then add /z/ (spelled *-es*):

| | | | |
|-------|--------|-------|---------|
| calf | calves | leaf | leaves |
| elf | elves | sheaf | sheaves |
| half | halves | shelf | shelves |
| knife | knives | thief | thieves |
| life | lives | wolf | wolves |
| wife | wives | loaf | loaves |

Note: Not all nouns that end in /f/ form their plural in this way. *Fife*, for instance, has the plural *fifes*.

3. A few words ending in /θ/ change the /θ/ to /ð/ and then add /z/ (spelled *-s*).

| | |
|-------|--------|
| bath | baths |
| lath | laths |
| path | paths |
| mouth | mouths |

4. The final /s/ sound in the noun *house* changes to /z/ before the plural ending /iz/ is added: *house, houses*.

5. A number of nouns have the same form in both singular and plural.

| | |
|---------|-----------|
| a deer | two deer |
| a fish | two fish |
| a sheep | two sheep |

Most nouns referring to game fish and animals are not changed for the plural: *six trout, two salmon; many bear, several elk, a number of moose*. Apart from the exception cited, the names of animals form plurals in the regular way: *three bears, several giraffes, many monkeys*.

Biologists speak of *fishes*, meaning kinds, or species, of fish. Compare the plural of mass nouns, Lesson 3.

6. Nouns of nationality ending in /s/ or /z/ usually remain unchanged in the plural.

| | |
|------------|------------------|
| a Swiss | several Swiss |
| a Chinese | several Chinese |
| a Japanese | several Japanese |

Nouns Used Only in the Singular or the Plural

1. *News*, though plural in form, is always singular.
This news is very good.

2. Several names of countries are plural in form but singular in construction.

The United States is a member of the United Nations.

The Netherlands is north of Belgium.

3. *People* is ordinarily singular in form, plural in meaning: *some people, those people, many people*. The use of *people* to mean "nation" is unusual, but when this happens, it takes the normal plural ending.

The peoples of the world want happiness.

4. There are a number of common words that exist only in the plural: *clothes, riches, thanks*; words describing instruments with a pair of similar opposing parts such as *scissors, tongs, pliers, tweezers*; articles of clothing with two legs, such as *pants, trousers, breeches, shorts, slacks, drawers*. By extension, many informal names of clothing are only plural: *civvies* (Navy slang for "civilian clothing"), *overalls* ("a one-piece garment often worn while working"), *etc.* The noun *cattle* is always plural.

5. Nouns ending in *-s* are often ambiguous as to their number: *measles, mumps, means, whereabouts, headquarters*. These words are used sometimes as singular, sometimes as plural. It is generally taught that names of diseases like *measles* and *mumps* are singular, but many people ignore this rule. *Whereabouts* and *headquarters* would be considered plural by most people, although "this headquarters" is regularly said in military circles. *Means* may be either singular or plural as to sense: *this means, these means*.

6. Nouns ending in *-ics* are troublesome. They tend to be singular if they mean the study of certain principles of a subject, plural if they mean the application of these principles.

Statistics is not an exact science.

Statistics prove that . . .

Politics is an art.

My *politics* are nobody's business but mine.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy.

The *ethics* of this situation demand that . . .

Mathematics, economics, linguistics, and physics are almost always singular. *Athletics* and *tactics* are almost always plural.

7. Nouns of foreign origin, of which technical English has a great many, have two types of plural. Some of them have retained their foreign plurals; others have acquired English plurals; still others have both. The following nouns are ordinarily used with foreign plurals only:

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| agendum | agenda* |
| alumnus, alumna | alumni, alumnae |
| analysis | analyses |
| basis | bases |
| criterion | criteria |
| datum | data* |
| hypothesis | hypotheses |
| parenthesis | parentheses |
| phenomenon | phenomena |
| thesis | theses |
| cherub | cherubim |

(and many others)

The following nouns are used with either the English plural or the foreign plural, though in most cases the English plural is preferred:

| <i>Singular</i> | <i>Foreign Plural</i> | <i>English Plural</i> |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| cactus | cacti | cactuses |
| curriculum | curricula | curriculums |
| formula | formulae | formulas |
| index | indices | indexes |
| memorandum | memoranda | memorandums |
| plateau | plateaux | plateaus |

8. Compound nouns that are written as one word form their plurals by adding the regular plural sign at the end of the word.

| | |
|------------|-------------|
| toothpick | toothpicks |
| bedroom | bedrooms |
| drawbridge | drawbridges |

* *Data* is coming more and more to be treated as a singular mass noun: *this data proves*, rather than *these data prove*. *Agenda* is usually treated as a singular. *Agendum* is seldom used.

As a rule, hyphenated phrases that function as nouns add the plural sign to the main noun in the compound if it contains a noun, or to the last word if there is no noun in the compound. *Carryings-on* is exceptional.

| | |
|---------------|----------------|
| court-martial | courts-martial |
| man-at-arms | men-at-arms |
| mother-in-law | mothers-in-law |
| drive-in | drive-ins |
| hand-me-down | hand-me-downs |

The Possessive Case of Nouns

1. *Forms of the Possessive*

Theoretically, all English nouns have the possessive case; in actual use, except in special phrases, the possessive is generally restricted to the names of living beings. In speech, the possessive form of regular nouns is exactly like the plural, though there is a difference in spelling. There are two possessives, singular and plural, but in only a few nouns is there any difference in sound between them.

| <i>Singular</i> | <i>Singular</i> | <i>Plural</i> | <i>Plural</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| <i>Noun</i> | <i>Possessive</i> | <i>Noun</i> | <i>Possessive</i> |
| boy | boy's | boys | boys' |
| lady | lady's | ladies | ladies' |
| cat | cat's | cats | cats' |
| witch | witch's | witches | witches' |

You will note that the spelling of the possessive of regular nouns is as follows: 's is added to the singular for the singular possessive, and the apostrophe alone (') is added to the plural for the plural possessive. In sound, the plural, the singular possessive, and the plural possessive are identical. This means that even native speakers of English have difficulty in mastering the correct spelling of the possessive.