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Parts of Speech Overview

Summary:

This handout defines the basic parts of speech and provides examples of their uses in sentences. Links to more handouts and exercises on particular parts of speech are also provided. If you are learning English as a Second Language (ESL), you may also want to browse through a complete listing of our ESL resources.

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Nouns

A noun is a word that denotes a person, place, or thing. In a sentence, nouns answer the questions who and what.

Example: The *dog* ran after the *ball*.

In the sentence above, there are two nouns, *dog* and *ball*. A noun may be concrete (something you can touch, see, etc.), like the nouns in the example above, or a noun may be abstract, as in the sentences below.

Example 1: She possesses *integrity*.

Example 2: He was searching for *love*.

The abstract concepts of *integrity* and *love* in the sentences above are both nouns. Nouns may also be proper.

Example 1: She visited *Chicago* every year.

Example 2: *Thanksgiving* is in *November*.

Chicago, *Thanksgiving*, and *November* are all proper nouns, and they should be capitalized. (For more information on proper nouns and when to capitalize words, see our handout on [Capital Letters](#).)

You may also visit our handout on [Count and Noncount Nouns](#).

Learn how to spot verbs that act as nouns. Visit our handout on [Verbals: Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives](#).

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun in a sentence.

Example: *She* decided to go to a movie.

In the sentence above, *she* is the pronoun. Like nouns, pronouns may be used either as subjects or as objects in a sentence.

Example: *She* planned to ask *him* for an interview.

In the example above, both *she* and *him* are pronouns; *she* is the subject of the sentence while *him* is the object. Every subject pronoun has a corresponding object form, as shown in the table below.

Subject and Object Pronouns	
<i>Subject Pronouns</i>	<i>Object Pronouns</i>
I	Me
We	Us
You	You
She	Her
He	Him
It	It
They	Them

For more information on pronouns, go to our handout on [Pronouns](#).

To find out what part of speech are *that*, *which*, and *whom*? Visit our handout on [Relative Pronouns](#).

Articles

Articles include *a*, *an*, and *the*. They precede a noun or a noun phrase in a sentence.

Example 1: They wanted *a* house with *a* big porch.

Example 2: He bought *the* blue sweater on sale.

In example 1, the article *a* precedes the noun *house*, and *a* also precedes the noun phrase *big porch*, which consists of an adjective (*big*) and the noun it describes (*porch*). In example 2, the article *the* precedes the noun phrase *blue sweater*, in which *sweater* is the noun and *blue* the adjective.

For more information, go to our handouts on [Articles: A vs. An](#) and [How to Use Articles \(a/an/the\)](#).

Adjectives

An adjective is a word that modifies, or describes, a noun or pronoun. Adjectives may precede nouns, or they may appear after a form of the reflexive verb to be (*am*, *are*, *is*, *was*, etc.).

Example 1: We live in the *red brick* house.

Example 2: She is *tall* for her age.

In example 1, two consecutive adjectives, *red* and *brick*, both describe the noun *house*. In example 2, the adjective *tall* appears after the reflexive verb *is* and describes the subject, *she*.

For more on adjectives, go to our handouts [Adjective or Adverb](#) and [How to Use Adjectives and Adverbs](#).

Verbs



A verb is a word that denotes action, or a state of being, in a sentence.

Example 1: Beth *rides* the bus every day.

Example 2: Paul *was* an avid reader.

In example 1, *rides* is the verb; it describes what the subject, Beth, does. In example 2, *was* describes Paul's state of being and is therefore the verb.

There may be multiple verbs in a sentence, or there may be a verb phrase consisting of a verb plus a helping verb.

Example 1: She *turned* the key and *opened* the door.

Example 2: Jackson *was studying* when I saw him last.

In example 1, the subject *she* performs two actions in the sentence, *turned* and *opened*. In example 2, the verb phrase is *was studying*.

Some words in a sentence may look like verbs but act as something else, like a noun; these are called verbals. For more information on verbs that masquerade as other parts of speech, go to our handout on [Verbals: Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives](#).

To learn more about conjugating verbs, visit our handouts on [Verb Tenses](#), [Irregular Verbs](#), and [Two-Part \(Phrasal\) Verbs \(Idioms\)](#).

Adverbs

Just as adjectives modify nouns, adverbs modify, or further describe, verbs. Adverbs may also modify adjectives. (Many, though not all, adverbs end in *-ly*.)

Example 1: He waved *wildly* to get her attention.

Example 2: The shirt he wore to the party was *extremely* bright.

In the first example, the adverb *wildly* modifies the verb *waved*. In the second example, the adverb *extremely* modifies the adjective *bright*, which describes the noun *shirt*. While nouns answer the questions *who* and *what*, adverbs answer the questions *how*, *when*, *why*, and *where*.

For a more detailed discussion of adverbs, visit our handout [Adjective or Adverb](#) and become an expert.

Conjunctions

A conjunction is a word that joins two independent clauses, or sentences, together.

Example 1: Ellen wanted to take a drive into the city, *but* the cost of gasoline was too high.

Example 2: Richard planned to study abroad in Japan, *so* he decided to learn the language.

In the examples above, both *but* and *so* are conjunctions. They join two complete sentences with the help of a comma. *And*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet* can all act as conjunctions.

Prepositions



Prepositions work in combination with a noun or pronoun to create phrases that modify verbs, nouns/pronouns, or adjectives. Prepositional phrases convey a spatial, temporal, or directional meaning.

Example 1: Ivy climbed *up* the brick wall *of* the house.

There are two prepositional phrases in the example above: *up the brick wall* and *of the house*. The first prepositional phrase is an adverbial phrase, since it modifies the verb by describing where the ivy climbed. The second phrase further modifies the noun *wall* (the object of the first prepositional phrase) and describes which wall the ivy climbs.

For a more detailed discussion on this part of speech and its functions, click on [Prepositions](#).

Below is a list of prepositions in the English language:

Aboard, about, above, across, after, against, along, amid, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, by, down, during, except, for, from, in, into, like, near, of, off, on, onto, out, over, past, since, through, throughout, to, toward, under, underneath, until, unto, up, upon, with, within, without.

