

Grammar Preview 1: Nouns and Adjectives

This preview of basic grammar covers the following: how to determine which words in a sentence are nouns; how to determine which words in a sentence are adjectives; and at the end of the preview we'll practice identifying nouns and adjectives in sentences.

At heart, nouns are things like objects, people, animals, ideas, names, places, times, qualities, categories, groups and all sorts of other “things.” Basically, if you can touch it with your hand, then it's probably a noun. Or if you can do the equivalent with your mind — that is, consider, conceive and contemplate it — if you can wrap your head around it, it's a noun.

Identifying nouns in English is not hard. Most have one or more of three characteristic features. One, English nouns are often preceded by one of two articles, “the, a” — articles are small words used with a noun that act like weak forms of “this” or “some” — for instance, “the car, a doctor, a mother, the mind.” Two, the vast majority of nouns in English can be pluralized with *-s*: “cars, doctors, mothers, minds.” This test, the plural *s*-test, is probably the best and easiest way to check if a word is a noun. In other words, if you can pluralize it with *-s*, it's all but definitely a noun. And finally nouns can be replaced with pronouns like “he, she, it, they,” or their objective equivalents “him, her, it, them.” A car, for instance, can also be called “it”: “I bought a car” is the same as saying “I bought it,” assuming the person you're talking to understands that the “it” in the second sentence means the car. The reason this test works is that pronouns like “it, he, she, they” replace nouns and only nouns, not any other part of speech. So, “doctor” can be replaced by “s/he” or “her/him.” Thus, “the doctor is good” can also be expressed as “S/he is good.” “I like the doctor” is equivalent to “I like her/him.” Similarly, “they/them” is the pronoun equivalent used to replace plural nouns like “cars, doctors”: “The cars are over there” equals “They are over there.” “I visited the doctors” equals “I visited them.” That means, if you can put a pronoun like “he, her, them, it” in place of a word in a sentence, then that word is a noun. Pronoun-replacement is just as reliable a test as pluralizing in determining if a word is a noun. The only problem here is it assumes you know the nature and function of pronouns, which not everyone does. So I call the pronoun-test the second-best test. Everyone knows how to pluralize. That's the only reason the *s*-test is better.

So let's review. Here are the three ways to test if a word is a noun. Not all of them always work for every noun — some nouns don't take “the, a” or can't be pluralized with *-s* — but even if only one of these tests works, then the word is almost certainly a noun. Test 1: is there a “the, a” in front of the word, or can you put “the, a” in front of it? Test 2: is the word plural, or can it be made plural by adding *-s*? This is far and away the simplest and best test of a noun's “nounness.” And finally, Test 3: Can you replace the word in question with a pronoun like “he/him,” “she/her,” “they/them” or “it”?

Let's practice using those tests to determine whether or not a word is a noun. “Rome conquered the world.” [You're going to get a lot of Roman propaganda here. I'm a classicist. Promoting Rome is my job. Get used to it.] “Rome conquered the world.” Let's start with “world”? Is that a noun? It has “the” in front of it, and while it's not plural, you could pluralize it: “worlds.” And you can replace “world” with “it”: “Rome conquered it” means the same thing, assuming the listener understands that “it” means “world.” So no question! “World” has got to be a noun!

We'll color it red, as we will all the nouns we uncover here. Now what about "Rome"? Can you put "the" in front of "Rome"? "The Rome"? I suppose so. "The Rome of the late Republic was a dangerous place." "The Rome" seems artificial but not totally wrong. It's hard to tell. Let's see if another test doesn't give a clearer answer. Can you pluralize it? "Romes"? Well, there are "Romes" — there's a Rome in Italy and a Rome in Georgia — but "Romes" doesn't sound like something you'd say very often. So from both the first two tests, it's hard to see if "Rome" is a noun. There's one more test, however, the pronoun-replacement test. Let's hope that's more helpful. Can you replace "Rome" with "it"? Sure, that's easy: "It conquered the world." As long as you and your reader know you're talking about Rome, "it" can replace "Rome." No problem. So even though "Rome" passes only one of the noun tests with flying colors, "Rome" is clearly a noun. Finally, what about "conquered"? Can you put "a" in front of it? "A conquered"? No. Can you pluralize it? "Conquereds"? No. Can you replace it with "it" or any other pronoun? "Rome it'ed the world"? "Rome them'ed the world"? Definitely not. "Conquered" doesn't pass a single noun test. It must not be a noun. In the next grammar presentation we'll learn what "conquered" is — a verb! — but for the moment let's move on.

Here's another sentence that has nouns in it — almost all of them do! — and it's a little more complicated: "Who would have guessed that the Romans would eventually rule the countries around their land?" Now don't let the complexity of this sentence baffle you! Just apply the simple tests we learned above to each word one by one. When you attack things one by one, it doesn't make any difference if there're two or two hundred or two million of them. Tackle each individually and eventually you'll win. So let's start with a simple question: what words in this sentence have "the, a" in front of them? Those have to be nouns. Hmm. I don't see any "a's" at all, but there are two "the's": "the Romans" and "the countries." Both of those must be nouns. Just to be safe, let's apply the other rules. Both are also plural and could be replaced by "they" and "them": "Who would have guessed that *they* would eventually rule *them*?" "Romans" and "countries" are definitely nouns! Any others? What about "land"? It doesn't have "the, a" in front of it, but could you put it there? "The land"? "A land"? Sure! Can you pluralize it? "Lands"? Of course you can! Can you put "it" in place of "land"? "... the countries about *it*"? I suppose so, assuming the listener knows that "it" means "the Romans' land." "Land" must be a noun too.

That's pretty easy, isn't it? So let's ratchet up the game a little. Here's a whole paragraph: [Originally a population living in Italy on the edge of civilization, the Romans spent centuries conquering their neighbors. Though they did not seem to have the makings of greatness, through innovations in government and technology, they rose to supremacy over the people around the area they inhabited]. Find the nouns. There are fifteen. Pause this presentation and take a moment to apply the noun tests we just discussed and see if you can figure out which words here are nouns. When you restart the presentation, I'll go step-by-step with you over how to determine which words are nouns. Okay, stop the presentation now.

Okay, you found all fifteen? "Maybe," you say? We'll see. Let's start by applying the tests for nouns, beginning with the best and easiest one, the plural test. What's the first word in this passage that has a plural -s ending? "Romans." Next? "Centuries." Next? "Neighbors." Next? "Makings." Any more? Yes, "innovations." Any more? No. So on to the next test. What's the first word with "the, a" attached to the front? "A population." Next? "The edge." Next? Oh, way

at the bottom, “the people.” Any others? Yes, “the area. And no more “the’s” or “a’s.” How many nouns is that now? Nine, and there are fifteen. So that means there are still six to go. Now we’ll have to use the last test, the pronoun-replacement one. Which words can be replaced with “he/him, she/her, they/them, it”? “Originally”? No. “Living”? No. “In”? No. “Italy”? Yes, Italy’s an “it” — haha! — which means it’s a noun. That makes ten. What about “civilization”? Can that be replaced by “it”? Sure it can! So “civilization” must be a noun, too. That makes eleven. What about “spent”? “The Romans ‘it’ed’ centuries”? No. “conquering”? “It’ing”? No. “They” is already a pronoun, so forget it. What’s the next word that can be replaced with a pronoun? What about “greatness”? “To have the makings of ‘it’”? Yes, that can be “it,” so “greatness” is a noun. Twelve. Next? “Government”? Yes, that can also be “it.” So “government” is a noun. That makes thirteen. Two more. “Technology”? Can that be “it”? Sure. Fourteen. And the last noun in this passage? Which word is it? Which word can be replaced by “it”? That’s right! “Supremacy,” which you now have over nouns! You are a Noun Ninja! Those small pathetic “things” that cower beneath your mighty pointing sword-like index finger. Use your power wisely, Great One!

Now let’s make you an Admiral of Adjectives, too. Adjectives at heart are modifiers. To grammarians, “modifying” means “delimiting, restricting the possibilities of something.” So, for instance, if we’re standing in a big, crowded parking lot and I say “look at that car,” there are well over a hundred cars I could mean. But if I say “look at that yellow car,” the possibilities are far fewer, maybe only one. I mean, seriously, how many cars out there are yellow these days? Or if I say “the old doctor,” well now you know it’s not that young one over there. “A loving mother”? Well, that doesn’t really limit the possibilities very much. Mothers tend to be loving, but it does rule out some. Medea? “The best mind”? So we’re probably talking about someone at a university. Like a professor. Like me. Okay, fine but definitely not a politician! Adjectives are very useful because they allow us to be precise about which noun out of a group we mean without having to create a new noun for every possibility. Think about it! What if there had to be a different word for every type of car, or mother, or mind, or doctor? Well, for “doctor” there almost is — pediatrician, gerontologist, neurologist, cardiologist — which only makes the point. “Kidney specialist, heart surgeon, nerve doctor”—that would be so much easier to remember. It’s a good thing we non-doctors have adjectives and aren’t obliged to use different nouns to characterize every possible type of mother or car!

But what characterizes an adjective? How do you tell which words in a sentence are adjectives? Like nouns, adjectives can have “the, a” in front of them — nouns and adjectives are the only parts of speech that regularly do — but unlike nouns, adjectives can’t stand alone and make any sort of sense, even when they have “the, a” in front of them. “The yellow, an old, a loving, the best”? All those adjectives need nouns to complete their meaning: “the yellow car, an old doctor, a loving mother . . .” “The best”? Well, that can stand alone when you mean “the best person/thing,” as in “Latin attracts only the best and brightest,” meaning “the best and brightest students,” or “I want you to have the best,” meaning “the best thing.” But adjectives like “best” aren’t functioning as adjectives here. They’re functioning as nouns. When adjectives act this way, grammarians call them substantives and we’re not going to discuss them here — I won’t use substantives in any of my examples below — but if you go on to study Latin or English grammar further, you’re very likely to run into substantives so you will have to learn how they work.

What adjectives do — normal adjectives, the way the vast majority of adjectives in real speech operate — what normal adjectives do is answer the question “what sort of?” or “which one?” Which car? The *yellow* one. What sort of doctor? An *old* one. What sort of mother? A *loving* one. Which minds? The *best* ones.

Here are three tests you can use to determine if a word is an adjective. One, can you put “the, a” in front of it? You’ll also need to add a noun, if you want it to make any sense. Two, is there a noun (or pronoun) with it that it “modifies”? English tends to put the adjective first so look for a noun immediately (or soon) after the adjective. There are occasions, however, when the adjective comes after the noun, especially in sentences like “You are wise.” “Wise” is an adjective modifying “you.” This happens very often with the word “to be” which can show up in various forms: am, are, is, was, were, have been, and so on. So look for an adjective following the noun or pronoun it modifies when the two are being connected by the word “to be” in some form. And, three, does the word serve the basic purpose that all adjectives serve? Does it tell you “what sort of” or “which” noun is meant?

In the same way we practiced identifying nouns, let’s practice identifying adjectives. “The classical Romans conquered the Mediterranean world.” This is a variation on the sentence in which we already identified the nouns. Do you remember which words were nouns here? That’s right! “Romans” and “world.” Now let’s look for adjectives. What about “classical”? Well, it has “the” in front of it. It’s attached to a noun (“Romans”), and it modifies that noun. It tells you what sort of Romans: not the modern Romans (the ones who are alive today), not pre-historic Romans (who lived before we have historical records of humans inhabiting Rome), but the classical Romans who lived during the age when ancient Rome rose to power. So “classical” is an adjective. We’ll color it orange, as we will all adjectives. Now, what about “Mediterranean”? It has “the” in front of it, too, and it’s also attached to a noun, in this case “world,” and it modifies that noun. It’s not the African world or the American world, but the Mediterranean world. So, “Mediterranean” is also an adjective. You got it?

Let’s see. Let’s up the ante a little bit, with a slightly longer sentence, a gently modified version of the sentence we did before when we were looking at nouns: “Would sensible people back in ancient times have ever guessed that the tiny Roman state would one day rule the whole Italian peninsula?” First, where are the nouns? Let’s get them out of the way. You know how to figure out if a word is a noun so I’ll tell you how many nouns there are on a line of text and you tell me which words are those nouns. The first line (“Would sensible people back in ancient...”) contains one noun. Which word is it? That’s right: “people.” You can pluralize it (“peoples”), put “the” in front of it (“the people”) and replace it with “it.” Line two (“...times have ever guessed that the tiny...”) includes one noun as well. Which word is that noun? Good for you! “Times”! It’s already plural, you can put “the” in front of it and replace it with “them.” “Them,” granted, would sound kind of odd but it works grammatically. The next line (“...Roman state would one day rule the...”) has two nouns. And they are ... “state” and “day.” Test them: states/days, the state/the day, “it” can replace either. Must be nouns. Last line: “whole Italian peninsula,” one noun. Which word? Yes, “peninsula.”

Now, what about the adjectives? Remember adjectives have to modify nouns so you can’t under normal circumstances have an adjective if there isn’t a noun. So, let’s look at the first noun

“people”? Is there an adjective with it? Is there something describing, modifying or delimiting what people are meant? Yes, “sensible.” It goes with “people” and tells you what sort of people we’re talking about. Also, while “sensible” doesn’t have “the” in front of it, you could add “the” if you wanted to: “the sensible people.” Are there any other adjectives in this line? Any other modifier directly in front of a noun? What about “ancient”? You could put “the” in front, it goes with a noun (“times”) and it tells you what sort of times. “Ancient” must be an adjective! On to the next line! Any adjectives there? The next noun is “state” on line three, so what about “tiny”? Does it tell you what kind of state? Sure! It’s yet another adjective. Next line. What about “Roman”? Does it tell you what kind of state? Indeed, it does: “the Roman state.” But wait! Can a noun have two adjectives? Can one stupid, silly, pointless, irritating, dumb, mindless noun have multiple adjectives? I’m sorry to say it can. So, “Roman” is clearly another adjective that goes with “state.” “Tiny” and “Roman” are both adjectives going with “state.” Any others on this line? Any other word that modifies a noun? There is another noun here: “day.” Does “day” have an adjective? Sure does! “One”! How many days? One day. If “one” isn’t delimiting, what is? Last line! I’ll give it away. There are two adjectives on this line, and there are only two words that aren’t nouns, so the adjectives must be “whole” and “Italian.” The “whole” peninsula, not just part of it. The “Italian” peninsula, not Greece or Florida. And again two adjectives with one noun. Get used to it. Think you got it? Let’s see.

Find the adjectives in here: [The early Romans ousted foreign kings and established a representative government led by executive officers and a legislative assembly of elders called the Senate. This state was not as democratic as it seems, because the only people who got a permanent seat in the Roman Senate had great wealth.] Start by identifying the nouns, one by one, and that way you’ll know where to look for adjectives. Adjectives have to modify nouns, remember. So you can’t have an adjective without a noun in some form or other. In line one — up to “kings” — I see two nouns. Which words are they? [Think plural!] That’s right: “Romans” and “kings.” Line two? NO nouns!! Okay, line three? Two nouns. Well, obviously “officers” — it’s plural — but which other word? Which one can be replaced by a pronoun like “it”? Yes, “government,” and it can be pluralized and have “the” in front of it. Definitely a noun! Line four: two nouns again. “Elders” obviously, another plural, but the other? “It” could replace which word? “Assembly”! And you could also say “the assemblies.” You got it. You’re so good. Line five: two nouns. “Senate” has “the” in front of it, and “state” can be pluralized. Must be nouns. Next line: one noun. “People,” of course. You can say “the people” or pluralize it or sing “it” like Barbra Streisand. There’s only one noun in the next line. “Seat,” that’s right: “a ... seat,” or “seats,” or “it.” Last line: two nouns. “Senate” — we saw that already a few lines above — and “wealth” which is hard to pluralize but you can add “the” to the front of it, and replace it with “it.”

Now, the fun part: adjectives. In line one, there are two adjectives. What sort of Romans are we talking about? “Early” Romans, huh? That delimits the noun “Romans” then, doesn’t it? Must be an adjective. And what kind of kings? “Foreign” kings, not local or homegrown. “Foreign” is another adjective. The next line has one adjective. Can you see it? What kind of government? A “representative” one. The adjective “representative” goes with “government” in the next line and tells you the type of government. On top of that, “representative” has “a” in front of it. It’s definitely an adjective. Next line: one adjective. Which word? “Executive”! It tells you what kind of officers. Next line: one more adjective. What kind of assembly? A “legislative”

assembly. “Legislative” is an adjective. Next line: two adjectives, and one of them is tricky. It’s small and you can easily overlook it. Which state? That’s right! “This” state, not that one or those two but “this” one. And the other adjective on this line? We know which state, but what kind of state is it? It’s “democratic,” another word that modifies “state,” but in this case the adjective comes after “state” because the noun “state” and its adjective “democratic” are being linked here by “was,” a form of the verb “to be.” “To be” often has an adjective that follows its noun. Moving on to the next line where there’s one more adjective. What is it? Good for you! “Only”! Which people? “Only” those people? That’s majorly delimiting, I’d say. And the next line: two adjectives. “Permanent” and “Roman.” And you tell me. How many adjectives are left in this passage? Any? Yes, one. “Great.” It tells you how much wealth, another way of saying what kind of wealth? “Great” wealth. Got it?

Here’s another paragraph: [Extended families of aristocratic extraction called *gentes* maintained absolute control over Rome throughout its early "Republican" history, a situation that lasted a half millennium until two such families, the Julians and the Claudians, established themselves as sole rulers in the first century, giving rise to the Roman "Empire."] Let’s start by identifying the nouns. In line one, there are two. I’m going to assume this is beginning to come rather quickly to you, so I feel like it’s time to accelerate our analysis. If you need more time than I give you during the presentation, pause it and ask yourself the test questions for nouns or adjectives. Okay, here we go. Back to the first line. Two nouns? “Families” (it’s plural) and “extraction” (it’s an “it”). Next line: two nouns. Yes, “*gentes*” and “control.” Okay, *gentes* is a weird foreign word but it’s still a noun. Line three: one noun. Right! “Rome.” Who can’t see that? “Rome” is the noun to end all nouns! Next line: two nouns. “History” and “situation.” Next line: two nouns. “Millennium” and “families” (again!). Next line: two nouns. “Julians” and “Claudians,” both plural. Next line: two nouns. [Forget “themselves.” It’s a pronoun.] “Rulers” and “century.” And the last line: two nouns. “Rise” and “Empire.” “Rise” is a noun here because it’s being used like “The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire.” “*The Rise ...*”? Must be a noun!

Now let’s see if you can ferret out the adjectives in this passage. Line one has two. That’s right: “extended” and “aristocratic.” Line two has one. “Absolute”? Absolutely! Line three has two. “Early” and “Republican.” They both tell you what sort of history. The next line has one. [Does “situation” have a modifier in front of it? No! So, no adjective there. What sort of “millennium” are we talking about? A full one? No!] A “half” millennium. “Half” has to be an adjective here. It’s telling what sort of millennium. In the next line are two adjectives. Little words both of them. Be careful! How many families? What sort of families? “Two” and “such.” A number like “two” can be an adjective when it’s modifying a noun. The next line has ... can you tell me how many adjectives? Trick question! There aren’t any. Teachers are so evil. What about the next-to-last line? See any adjectives there? I do. I see two. What kind of rulers? “Sole (rulers).” Which century? The “first” (century). And finally the last line. Anything adjectival there? Sure, “Roman.” That was easy, too easy. Let’s hike up the pace on this grammatical battlecruiser! Ramming speed!

Here’s another paragraph: [Instead, they spent their energy waging violent war with other peoples. They gained a reputation as tenacious fighters and developed an impressive system of warfare for a nation their size. They also had a powerful weapon, the legion, a battle formation quite complex for its age and requiring considerable time to learn.] Can you figure out which

words are nouns? I'll tell you right now there are fourteen. Pause the presentation and see how fast you can find them all. And there they are. How long did it take you? Seven seconds? Hmmmm. I'm not sure I believe you. Now let's look for adjectives. There are eight. Pause, and go get 'em, tiger! Seriously? You got them all already. Wow, you are the tiger. Now let's see if you're a lion.

Here's another passage to de-"noun"-ce, with another fourteen nouns: [Most battles in the days when Rome was young were fought in long, haphazard lines. The Thebans and later Alexander the Great had brought greater order to military formation, but their contributions consisted of simple innovations, stacking a line at one end or creating a huge block of men.] Pause and lick your claws until you find them all. That was nasty, wasn't it? There were a lot of plurals at the beginning, and plurals make it easier, don't they? Still, all those small nouns at the end! You can make them all plural, can't you? "Lines, ends, blocks." "Men" is already plural but it's a weird word that doesn't use an -s ending to form its plural.

How about the adjectives here. Ten total. Engage! Make it so! And there you are! Did you get everything right? You want to practice this more? Let me rephrase the question. Do you *need* to practice this more? If you do, here are six more paragraphs for you to test your understanding. I'll give you the passage, then on the next slide I'll show you the nouns, and on the next slide the adjectives, the same way we did above. Pause the presentation as necessary to figure out which words are nouns and adjectives. After you're done with this presentation and feel reasonably secure in your ability to identify nouns and adjectives, go on to the next presentation where we'll discuss prepositions and prepositional phrases. *Valete, discipuli!*

[The Roman legion employed a flexible arrangement of men who were organized into sub-groups which could be moved as independent units about the battlefield. This design and the dedication of the Romans to physical might were important contributing factors in making them the conquerors of the Mediterranean world.]

[The greatest triumph the early Romans achieved was the defeat of Carthage, a rival trading empire in North Africa. This conflict, actually a series of conflicts called the "Punic Wars," was to a large extent fought at sea, forcing the Romans to develop a full navy for the first time in their history.]

[Greek philosophers, poets and playwrights flooded into Rome and began teaching ways of life foreign to the rustic Romans. The invasion of new types of learning led to a cultural crisis in Rome, whether to stand by their traditional, time-tested, conservative "Roman" *mores* or to take up new, exotic, dangerous and delightful "Greek" habits.]

[As time passed, the Romans came to see the Greeks as corrupters who wished to spoil them with outlandish pleasures and with all their oriental double-talk undermine the simple virtues that had once made Rome great. Thus, the fabric of Roman society began to unravel and fray.]

[Worse yet, these ideological struggles in the 100's BCE boiled over into military conflicts in the next century. For the first time in their history, Roman met Roman on the battlefield, and the

outcome was nothing less than the destruction of the Republic and the establishment of a more peaceful but at heart autocratic empire.]