

Notes on Nouns

A Few Facts and Figures about the Most Prolific Part of Speech

n.

- **Common Nouns**

Here, according to researchers at Oxford University Press, are the ten most frequently used nouns in English:

1. time
2. person
3. year
4. way
5. day
6. thing
7. man
8. world
9. life
10. hand

"Woman" comes in at number 14, "work" at 15, and "war" at 49. Neither "play" nor "peace," unfortunately, is ranked in the top 100. The 2006 study was based on analysis of the more than one billion words in the Oxford English Corpus.

- **Nominalization**

It's not hard to manufacture nouns in English. Adding *-ing* to a verb creates a noun (or, more precisely, a gerund): "*Winning* isn't everything," "*Waiting* can be painful," "Good *eating* deserves good *drinking*." Likewise, adding a suffix such as *-ness* or *-ity* to an adjective can turn it into a noun: "Hold *faithfulness* and *sincerity* as first principles." And simply putting the definite article "the" before an adjective also does the trick: "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly."

- **Noun Stacking**

Another way to multiply nouns is to string two or three together, as in "precipitation event" or "interrogation enhancement techniques." Such *nounism*, says William Zinsser, is "a new American disease" (though it appears to have spread overseas as well): "Today as many as four or five concept nouns will attach themselves to each other, like a molecule chain. Here's a brilliant specimen I recently found: 'Communication facilitation skills development intervention.' Not a person in sight, or a working verb. I think it's a program to help students write better" (*On Writing Well*, Collins, 2006).

- **Supersized Nouns**

In his delightful book *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It* (Broadway Books, 2007), Ben Yagoda calls attention to another unfortunate nominal trend: the needless expansion of nouns and the growing reliance on polysyllabic synonyms, "apparently in the belief that the longer the word, the better." Thus, "utilization" is preferred to "use," "signage" to "signs," and--my pet peeve--"transparency" to "openness."

- **Not a Single Smithereen**
The Latin phrase *plurale tantum* ("plural only") refers to any noun that appears only in the plural and has no singular form: "jeans," for example, and "underpants." In *Crazy English: The Ultimate Joy Ride Through Our Language* (Pocket Books, 1989), Richard Lederer asks, "Doesn't it seem just a little loopy that we can make amends but never just one amend; that no matter how carefully we comb through the annals of history, we can never discover just one annal; that we can never pull a shenanigan, be in a doldrum, eat an egg Benedict, or get just one jitter, a willy, a delirium tremen, or a heebie-jeebie? Why, sifting through the wreckage of a disaster, can we never find just one smithereen?"
- **And in case you were wondering . . .**
Yes, there's also a term for a noun that appears only in the singular form: *singulare tantum*. In this category we find mass nouns (also known as *noncount nouns*), such as "mud," "knowledge," "spaghetti," and (coming in at number 15 on the list of the most common nouns in English) "work."

Types of Nouns

1.- collective noun

Definition:

A noun (such as *team* or *family*) that refers to a collection of individuals. In American English, collective nouns *usually* take singular verb forms. Collective nouns can be replaced by both singular and plural pronouns, depending on their meaning.

Examples and Observations:

- "The *family* is one of nature's masterpieces."
(George Santayana)
- "The *minority* is sometimes right; the *majority* always wrong."
(George Bernard Shaw)
- "The penalty for laughing in a courtroom is six months in jail; if it were not for this penalty, the *jury* would never hear the evidence."
(H.L. Mencken)
- "Make sure you have finished speaking before your *audience* has finished listening."
(Dorothy Sarnoff)
- "*Liverpool* are magic, *Everton* are tragic."
(Emlyn Hughes, referring to two English football teams)

- "Nouns such as *committee, family, government, jury, and squad* take a singular verb or pronoun when thought of as a single unit, but a plural verb or pronoun when thought of as a collection of individuals:
 - The committee gave its unanimous approval to the plans.
 - The committee enjoyed biscuits with their tea.

(David Marsh, *Guardian Style*, Guardian Books, 2007)

- "Many noncount nouns have an equivalent countable expression using such words as *piece* or *bit* (*partitive* or **collective** nouns) followed by *of*:
 - luck: a piece of luck
 - grass: a blade of grass
 - bread: a loaf of bread

A common quiz question is to find the special collective term which describes such groups of things: *a **flock** of sheep, a **pride** of lions*. English has some highly specialized (but nowadays rarely used) collective nouns, especially for animals. . . . One of them [is] *a **kindle** of kittens*. Other colourful collectives are:

- an exaltation of larks
- a muster of peacocks
- a rout of wolves
- a skulk of foxes"

(David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2003)

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