



Parts of Speech

The *parts of speech* are a system for classifying words in the English language. We group words in categories that share common characteristics in order to talk about the language more easily. For our purposes, we can say that English words fall into the following eight parts of speech: **verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections**. Many English words can function as more than one part of speech. For example, when you *book* a plane flight, it is a verb; when you read a good *book*, it is a noun; and when you have *book* knowledge, it is an adjective. Thus, the function of a word in a sentence, rather than the word itself, always determines its part of speech in that sentence. Knowing the eight parts of speech is important because this knowledge will allow you to better identify how words are functioning in a sentence. Punctuating a sentence correctly often depends on the writer's ability to correctly identify the function of a given word.

Recognizing Verbs

Verbs are among the most important words, for they move the meaning of sentences along by showing action (*look, run*), occurrence (*become, happen*), or a state of being (*be, live*). They are the part of speech that can tell time in that they have tense. They can indicate that something has already happened, that it is currently happening, or that it will happen at a later time. In addition to changing form to show time, verbs can change depending on what form of person is doing the action (first person, I *run*; second person, you *run*; third person, she/he/it *runs*), and whether the verb's subject is singular or plural (one dog *plays*, two dogs *play*). When identifying verbs, look for words that can change form to past, present, and future. If the word can change tense (verb time), it's a verb.

Recognizing Nouns

Nouns name things. Nouns can name persons (*teacher, child*), places (*river, restaurant*), things (*car, suitcase*), or concepts (*happiness, balance*). Nouns function as subjects and objects in sentences (The *teacher* lost his *briefcase*). Nouns can usually be made plural (one *cat*, two *cats*), but there are some exceptions known as noncount nouns which cannot be made plural in the normal sense because they name a quality that is not countable (*meat, sand*). Proper nouns name specific persons, places, things, or concepts (*Jessica, Nevada, Supreme Court, Islam*) and are, therefore, capitalized. Collective nouns name groups (*team, flock, jury*) but are usually considered singular because they represent the unit as a whole.

Recognizing Pronouns

Pronouns serve as substitutes for nouns in sentences and often take the place of specific nouns so that the writer does not have to repeat a noun that has already been stated. A specific noun that a pronoun replaces or refers to is called the *antecedent* of the pronoun. There are several kinds of pronouns. Pronouns can refer to specific persons or things (*I, me, my, mine*) or unspecified persons or things (*somebody, anything*); they can also express ideas of quantity (*all, some, any, none*) or point to specific nouns (*this, that, these*).

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Recognizing Adjectives

Adjectives modify (limit the meaning of) nouns and pronouns, usually by describing, identifying, or quantifying those words. They are the "show-and-tell" words that show what nouns and pronouns are like. For example, adjectives can perform their show-and-tell act on the noun "car" and make it into a *black* car, or an *old* car, or a *fast new* car, or a *wrecked* car; they can even make it into *two* cars. In addition to their basic forms, most descriptive adjectives have other forms that are used to make comparisons: *small, smaller, smallest; foolish, more foolish, most foolish, less foolish, least foolish*. Adjectives typically appear either before the noun or pronoun they modify or after a linking verb (The car is *black*).

Recognizing Adverbs

Adverbs have a similar function to adjectives, except that instead of modifying nouns, adverbs modify, limit, or describe verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or entire clauses. They usually answer the questions Where? When? Why? How? To what degree? or Under what conditions?

Example: The car accelerated *rapidly*.

In this example, *rapidly* further describes the verb (the car's action), telling us *how* the car accelerated. Many adverbs have an *-ly* ending, though some do not (*always, never, very, well, not* and some words that end in *-ly* are not adverbs but adjectives (*friendly, lovely*)).

Recognizing Prepositions

The purpose of prepositions is to show the *position* of nouns or pronouns in relation to other nouns and pronouns. Prepositions can show relationships in space, where something is (The rat ran *under* the door), and they can show relationships in time, when something occurred (Anna arrived just *before* dinner). Prepositions begin grammatical structures called prepositional phrases which are made up of the preposition, the preposition's object (the noun or pronoun the preposition is in relation to), and any words that modify that object (Don't drop that food *on the new carpet*). Common prepositions include *about, across, against, among, as, at, before, below, beneath, between, by, during, except, for, from, in, like, of, regarding, until, and without*.

Recognizing Conjunctions

Conjunctions, like prepositions, show the relationship between parts of a sentence. They connect words or groups of words to each other, and therefore allow the writer to communicate more sophisticated ideas to the reader. There are several kinds of conjunctions that perform slightly different tasks. The seven coordinating conjunctions join equivalent structures—two or more nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, phrases, or clauses that have equal weight. There are seven coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*—the first letters of which create the often-used acronym *fanboys*. Correlative conjunctions appear in pairs, such as *both ...and, either ...or, neither ...nor, just as ...so, not only...but also, whether ...or*. Subordinating conjunctions (sometimes called dependent words) introduce subordinate (dependent) clauses and connect them to independent clauses. Common subordinating conjunctions include *although, because, if, unless, while, since, before, after*.

Recognizing Interjections

Interjections express surprise or emotion or attract attention: *oh, ouch, ah, hey*. Interjections often stand alone, as fragments, and even when they are included in a sentence, they are not related grammatically to the rest of the sentence. Interjections are used mostly in speaking; in writing, they are used mostly in dialogue and are always followed by an exclamation point or comma.

* This handout was adapted with permission from a similar one used by Columbia College's Academic Achievement Center.

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