Nouns, pronouns, determiners and noun phrases

Understanding why writers choose the words and phrases they do is important to Strand 6.2 (Analysing how writers’ use of linguistic and literary features shapes and influences meaning) particularly the progressive references to grammatical features.

Nouns

Nouns are lexical words; they carry meaning. Although the definition of ‘naming word’ works reasonably well, there are times when even this lets you down. It is useful, therefore, to look at how nouns behave as an aid to identifying them.

A word is a noun if some of the following factors apply:

- it may combine with a determiner, for example, a, the, a few, some;
- it changes form to show singular, plural or possession, for example, boy, boys, boy’s, boys’;
- it acts as the head word of a noun phrase, for example, all the sticky cakes;
- it uses suffixes to make other classes of words, for example, beauty, beautiful, beautify.

Many nouns (countable nouns) can be singular (only one) or plural (more than one): book/books, sister/sisters.

Other nouns (mass or uncountable nouns) do not normally occur in the plural: tea, coffee, sugar, butter, music, electricity, money.

Mass, or uncountable, nouns prove difficult for learners of English, especially when they hear Two sugars, please or How many coffees do we need? They need clear explanations of how to use these nouns in speech and writing. Issues arise as, traditionally, mass nouns are used with less e.g. less coffee; and countable nouns with few e.g. few/fewer dogs. Compare also less difficulty, fewer difficulties. Increasingly, however, less is used across the board: less dogs, less jobs. Grammarians describe this, but do not dictate which is right. It is language change in action.

Nouns can also be categorised as:

- common: cat, dog, man, woman, dinner;
- proper: London, Scrooge, Victorians, Christmas, 'A Christmas Carol';
- collective: a flock of sheep, a crowd of people, a team of players;
- abstract: difficulty, fear, courage, womanhood.
Pronouns

Pronouns often take the place of a noun or noun phrase, allowing us to avoid repetition.

There are several kinds of pronoun:

- **Personal** Like *I, me*, see paradigm below
- **Demonstrative**: *this, that, these, those*.
- **Indefinite**: *anyone, everybody, something*.
- **Interrogative**: *who, whom, whose, which, what*.
- **Relative**: *who, what, that*.
- **Object**: *who, that*.
- **Possessive**: *whose*.

There is no suggestion that pupils should learn pronouns by rote, but investigating use and drawing up their own table may help them compare with their home language/variety or other languages they are learning. Regional usage often varies from Standard English and pupils need to be aware of which variety to choose both when speaking and writing.

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<th>As subject</th>
<th>As direct object</th>
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If pupils can learn to substitute *his/her or his/hers* for *its* and see that there is no apostrophe, it may help overcome the confusion between *its* in possession and *it’s* as a contraction of *it is/it has*.

**Mini task for pupils**

Use the paradigm above and invite them to write their regional variety alongside. The differences will mainly be in the reflexive pronouns. You could then discuss when each is appropriate. Any such activity builds pupils’ awareness and ability to choose.

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There is still controversy over the use of *whom* as a direct object: *Tell me whom he hit*. However, this usage is dying out and is no longer required by GCSE.

**Determiners**

- Determiners include many of the most frequent English words, for example: *the, a, my, this, that, those, each, every, some, any*. 
Determiners are words that precede nouns (this book, my friend, a car). They limit (or determine) the reference of the noun.

Determiners include: articles, demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers, numbers, some question words.

Words such as this, some, many and little can be pronouns. They are determiners only when they precede a noun, for example:

- I would like some cake. (determiner)
- I would like some. (pronoun)

The term **determiner** does not replace terms such as **definite article**. It refers to a larger class of words of which the **definite article** is a subclass. It is useful to be able to refer to this range of commonly occurring words without introducing the additional complexity of distinguishing between them.

**Mini task**

Invite pupils to consider the difference between, for example, a dog and the dog; a queen and the queen. Also the differences between things that are close, either literally or metaphorically, this and things which are further away that.

Invite pupils to look at non-fiction texts, especially information texts, and note that a noun with the can stand for the entire species: the shark, the bat, the wealthy. This is referred to as **nominalisation**.

**Noun phrases**

The noun phrase is especially significant in writing because most sentences contain several of them. It is often the length and complexity of these noun phrases that decide the overall length and complexity of the whole sentence.

The noun phrase, as the name implies, has a noun as the head word. However, you can refer to a single noun as a noun phrase, for example, cat; a pronoun, for example, it or a group of words that acts as a noun in the sentence: a curious cat, plenty of energy, a very notorious couple of cats.

There are four possible parts to the noun phrase:

- **the head**: the central noun;
- **the determiner**: this limits the reference of the noun;
- **the pre-modifiers**: words which appear before the head noun (adjectives, participles, even another noun);
- **post-modifiers**: any words appearing after the head noun but within the noun phrase.

For example:

That big, amusing joke book on the table is mine.

- **head** = book
- **determiner** = that
- **pre-modifiers** = big, amusing joke
- **post-modifier** = on the table

The noun phrase has the potential of expanding into a larger phrase unit, but it only rarely contains all these elements in speech or writing. In fact, pupils may need to be encouraged to expand their noun phrases in, for example, oral reports or recounts for more formal audiences, as we would rarely expand the noun phrase in general conversation, and when we do, it is usually relatively limited, for example, This huge dog came along; or We had a great holiday.
When writing, it is important that pupils do not over modify: it is much better to choose one or two words which carry the intended meaning, rather than a series of pre-modifying adjectives.

A pronoun can function as the head word in a noun phrase, for example:

- *The two mountaineers* are crossing *the glacier*.
- *They* are crossing *it*.