

English noun phrases mainly serve as subjects, objects, and complements. The basic English rule for forming a noun phrase is

The bracketed elements are optional. An example of a noun phrase that includes them all would be:

As long as there's a head, the noun phrase is "good" by the descriptive rules of English grammar. All these are good noun phrases:

- and so forth. Mix & match, but *keep them in order*; English grammar does not allow scrambling the word order:

* kitten grey the in the pet carrier

- the grey kitten (noun)
- the orange tabby cat (NP)
- the hungry (adjective; in the sense of "to feed the hungry")
- the sleeping (-ing participle; in the sense of "do not wake the sleeping")

Determiners can be phrases ("The only two grey kittens"), but to keep things simple let's just think of simple determiners like articles ("a, an, the"), numerals, and pronouns ("that, my") for the moment.

But what can serve as premodifiers and postmodifiers? The terms are somewhat tautological. A premodifier goes before and a postmodifier goes after, naturally - but what is allowed in those positions?

The most common **premodifiers** are:

- "attributive" nouns (the neighborhood cat)
- adjectives (the sleek cat)
- -ing participles (a purring cat)
- -ed participles (my speckled cat)
- possessive noun phrases (my stepdaughter's cat)

The most common **postmodifiers** are:

- prepositional phrases (that cat with the kinked tail)
- relative clauses (the cat that caught the fence lizard)
- -ing participle clauses (two cats sleeping in the office)
- -ed participle clauses (the cat adopted by our friend's mother)

Another kind of structure that's like a postmodifier is an **appositive**, a second noun phrase that follows to explain or define the head noun phrase:

- my cat Tweedy (where "Tweedy" is the appositive)

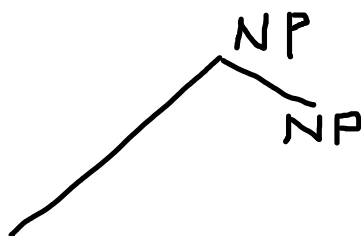
Strings of three nouns (attributive, head, appositive) are not uncommon in English, but can be initially hard to analyze because they're all the same word class:

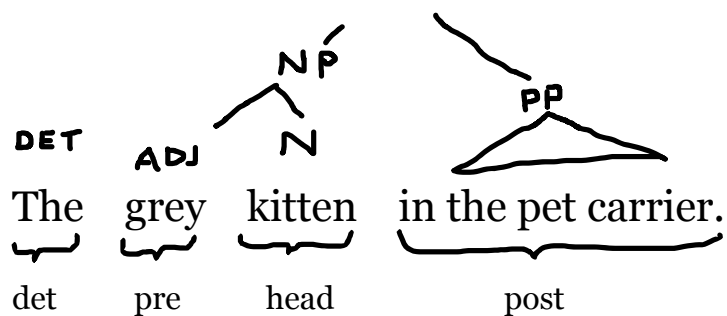
det	N	N	N
my	yoga	instructor	Phyllis
det	attributive	head	appositive

diagramming

There are many methods of diagramming. Diagrams are meant as visual aids to parsing; there is no absolute right method, but within the method you use, your results should be consistent and help you explain your parsing.

The simplified tree-diagram method I use breaks a unit down into smaller coherent units as it goes down the page. Every sub-unit is a good unit that belongs together and follows grammar rules.





Lines link elements of the text. Triangles indicate that what's below the triangle is a coherent unit, but isn't analyzed in any further detail at the moment.

Though it could be. We'll get to prepositional phrases later in the course:

