

English Word Classes and Inflectional Systems

All known languages have nouns and verbs; all languages have words that modify other words, pronouns, and grammatical elements that form the tissue of sentences.

Some classes of words **inflect**: change their endings (or with some verbs, their middles) according to their grammatical use.

English has these classes:

NOUNS are, classically, persons, places, or things - though they can also be ideas, actions, attitudes, and categories.

- **person:** Tim, Jane Austen, firefighter, grandmother, Tweedy
- **place:** home, lake, forest, Brooklyn, Australia
- **thing:** rope, wrench, lead pipe, candlestick, revolver, knife, Yaris, IKEA, sand, air
- **idea:** liberty, academia, anthropology, fairness, rights, debt, treason
- **action:** construction, scholarship, music, exploration
- **attitude:** happiness, love, anger, ennui, indifference, sarcasm
- **category:** noun, verb, adjective, novel, truck, opera

Note that nouns may be several of these things. "Novel" can mean the idea "long prose fictional story," or the idea of the literary work *Middlemarch*, or that book you are carrying in your backpack.

Most nouns are "common" nouns. Names are a special kind of noun, capitalized in written English and called "proper" nouns.

Nouns inflect for number and case. Plural, possessive, and plural possessive sound alike in regular nouns; in writing we distinguish them.

- **singular:** dog, cat, joy, pond, intellectualism
- **plural:** dogs, cats, joys, ponds, intellectualisms
- **possessive:** dog's, cat's, joy's, pond's, of intellectualism
- **plural possessive:** dogs', cats', joys', ponds', of intellectualisms

Many nouns have irregular plurals: teeth, oxen, children, feet, radii.

VERBS are action words in sentences. As we've seen, they can be intransitive, transitive, or linking.

- **intransitive:** sleep, sit, die, fade, grow
- **transitive:** hit, eat, show, score, write
- **linking:** be, feel, seem, become, cost

Verbs slip very easily among these classes. A few intransitive verbs like "sleep" and "die" strongly resist having objects; most verbs can't be used as linking verbs; but many verbs have both transitive and intransitive uses: "She writes books." "She writes." The verb "turn," like some others, can be used in all three ways:

- **intransitive:** The car turned left.
- **transitive:** I turned the pancakes.
- **linking:** Tweedy turned four this year.

Two other kinds of verbs work with "main" verbs to create more complex verb phrases: auxiliary and modal verbs. Auxiliaries can also be main verbs, and in other contexts can be intransitive, transitive, or linking. Modals are highly limited in form and function, but are extremely common.

- **auxiliary:** be, have, do, go
- **modal:** can, shall, will, must

Verbs have five inflectional forms:

- **bare:** sleep, show, have, ring, go, distribute
- **third-person singular:** sleeps, shows, has, rings, goes, distributes
- **past:** slept, showed, had, rang, went, distributed
- **-ed participle:** slept, showed (or shown), had, rung, gone, distributed
- **-ing participle:** sleeping, showing, having, ringing, going, distributing

Regular -ed participle forms have -ed endings, but many others are irregular.

Modal verbs do not inflect, though some pairs (like can/could) are used in present / past pairs.

ADJECTIVES "modify" nouns to give more information or opinion about those nouns. They can also be subject complements. "I ate some *good* food. The food was *good*." Examples: good, red, beautiful, tiny, awesome.

Adjectives inflect for comparative and superlative, either regularly ("red, redder, reddest") or more rarely, irregularly ("good, better, best"). Longer adjectives don't usually inflect. They form their comparative and superlative by means of phrases: "beautiful, more beautiful, most beautiful."

ADVERBS are like adjectives but modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or larger elements of sentences. Examples: very, rather, wryly, slyly, openly, often, also. Adverbs do not inflect.

DETERMINERS precede noun phrases to limit the phrases in some way. Most common are the **articles** "a, an, the" but we also use quantifying determiners like "few, some, many." Pronouns and numerals are often used as determiners. Determiners do not inflect.

NUMERALS are used like adjectives or determiners, but are specialized enough to be considered a different class. They are cardinal ("one, two, three") or ordinal ("first, second, third").

PRONOUNS are used in place of nouns, or as determiners. They are divided into **personal** ("I, she, you") or **demonstrative** ("that, this"), among other categories.

Pronouns inflect for **number** and **case**, and have other forms too:

- **singular:** I, you, he, this, that
- **plural:** we, you, they, these, those
- **object case:** me, you, him, us, them
- **possessive case:** my, your, his, our
- **independent possessive case:** mine, yours, his, ours
- **reflexive:** myself, yourself, herself

PREPOSITIONS precede nouns and other "complements" and are used as modifiers and adverbials. Common ones are "in, of, by." Less common are ones like "notwithstanding, circa, alongside." There are many prepositions, but the number is finite and even smaller in everyday use. Prepositions do not inflect.

CONJUNCTIONS link coordinated words and phrases and clauses ("and," "but," "or"), or introduce subordinate clauses ("since," "because," "after," "while"). Conjunctions do not inflect.

Linguists divide word classes into "open" (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and "closed" (everything else). Open classes readily accept new members, giving them regular inflections. Closed classes rarely accept new members.