The 8 parts of speech

1. Nouns

A noun is a **person**, **place**, **concept**, **or object**. Basically, anything that's a "thing" is a noun, whether you're talking about a basketball court, San Francisco, Cleopatra, or self-preservation.

Nouns fall into two categories: common nouns and proper nouns. **Common nouns** are general names for things, like **planet** and **game show**. **Proper nouns** are specific names for individual things, like **Jupiter** and **Jeopardy!**

2. Pronouns

Pronouns are the words you substitute for specific nouns when the reader or listener knows which specific noun you're referring to.

You might say "Jennifer was supposed to be here at eight," then follow it with "**she's** always late; next time I'll tell **her** to be here a half-hour earlier."

Instead of saying Jennifer's name three times in a row, you substituted **she** and **her** and your sentences remained grammatically correct. Pronouns are divided into a range of categories, and we cover them all in our guide to pronouns:

3. Adjectives

Adjectives are the words that describe nouns. Think about your favorite movie. How would you describe it to a friend who's never seen it?

You might say the movie was **funny**, **engaging**, **well-written**, or **suspenseful**. When you're describing the movie with these words, you're using adjectives. An adjective can go right before the noun it's describing (I have a **black** dog), but it doesn't have to. Sometimes, adjectives are at the end of a sentence (my dog is **black**).

4. Verbs

Go! **Be** amazing! **Run** as fast as you can! **Win** the race! **Congratulate** every participant for **putting** in the work to **compete**!

These bolded words are verbs. Verbs are words that describe specific actions, like **running**, **winning**, and **being** amazing.

Not all verbs refer to literal actions, though. Verbs that refer to feelings or states of being, like **to love** and **to be**, are known as **nonaction verbs**. Conversely, the verbs that *do* refer to literal actions are known as **action verbs**.

5. Adverbs

An adverb is a word that describes an adjective, a verb, or another adverb. Take a look at these examples:

Here's an example: I entered the room **quietly**. **Quietly** is describing how you *entered* (verb) the room.

Here's another example: A cheetah is **always** faster than a lion. **Always** is describing how frequently a cheetah is *faster* (adjective) than a lion.

6. Prepositions

Prepositions tell you the relationship between the other words in a sentence.

Here's an example: I left my bike leaning against the garage. In this sentence, **against** is the preposition because it tells us *where* I left my bike.

Here's another example: She put the pizza **in** the oven. Without the preposition **in**, we don't know where the pizza is.

7. Conjunctions

Conjunctions make it possible to build complex sentences that express multiple ideas.

I like marinara sauce. I like alfredo sauce. I don't like puttanesca sauce. Each of these three sentences expresses a clear idea. There's nothing wrong with listing your preferences like this, but it's not the most efficient way to do it.

Consider instead: I like marinara sauce **and** alfredo sauce, **but** I don't like puttanesca sauce.

In this sentence, **and** and **but** are the two conjunctions that link your ideas together.

8. Articles

A pear. **The** brick house. **An** exciting experience. These bolded words are known as articles.

Like nouns, articles come in two flavors: definite articles and indefinite articles. And just like the two types of nouns, the type of article you use depends on how specific you need to be about the thing you're discussing.

A definite article describes one specific noun, like **the** and **this**. Example: Did you buy **the** car?

Now swap in an indefinite article: Did you buy **a** car?

See how the implication is gone and you're asking a much more general question?

Figuring out parts of speech

Sometimes, it's not easy to tell which part of speech a word is. Here are a few easy "hacks" to quickly figure out what part of speech you're dealing with:

- If it's an adjective plus the ending "-ly," it's an **adverb**. Examples: commonly, quickly.

- If you can swap it out for a noun and the sentence still makes sense, it's a **pronoun**. Example: We played basketball. / Steve and I played basketball.

- If it's something you *do*, and you can modify the sentence to include the word *do*, it's a **verb**. Examples: I have an umbrella. / I do have an umbrella.

- If you can remove the word and the sentence still makes sense, but you lose a detail, the word is *most likely* an **adjective**. Example: She drives a red van. / She drives a van.

- If you can remove the word and the sentence doesn't make sense, it's likely a preposition. Example: I left my notebook on the desk. / I left my notebook the desk.

And if you're ever really stumped, just look the word up. Dictionaries typically list the part of speech a word fits in its entry, and if it fits more than one part of speech, both are listed with examples.

That brings us to another common issue that can confuse writers and language learners:

When a word is two different kinds of speech

Just like Y is sometimes a vowel but sometimes a consonant, there are words that are *sometimes* one part of speech and other times another. Here are a few examples:

- Work

  - I went to **work** (noun).

  - I **work** in the garden (verb).

- Well

  - She paints very **well** (adverb).

- He's **well**-liked in his community (adjective).

- I dropped a penny in the **well** (noun).

- But

- I cooked breakfast and lunch, **but** Steve cooked dinner (conjunction).

- I brought everything **but** the pens you asked for (preposition).

  And sometimes, words evolve to fit into new parts of speech. One recent example is the word "adult." Before the 2010s, **adult** was primarily a noun that referred to a fully grown person. It could also be used as an adjective to refer to specific types of media, like adult contemporary music. But then, at right about the turn of the 2010s, the word **adulting**, a brand-new verb, appeared in the internet lexicon. As a verb, **adulting** is the act of doing tasks like paying bills and grocery shopping.

Open and closed word classes

The parts of speech fall into two word classes: open and closed.

Open word classes are parts of speech that regularly acquire new words. Language evolves, and usually, evolution happens in these parts of speech: **nouns**, **adjectives**, **adverbs**, **and verbs**. Closed word classes are the parts of speech that *don't* regularly add new words. These parts of speech are more "set in stone" and include **pronouns**, **conjunctions**, **articles**, **and prepositions**.