Back to Basics III: Noun-Sense

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff
Concordia University School of Law, tfordyce@cu-portland.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/lawfaculty
Part of the Legal Writing and Research Commons

CU Commons Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Law at CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.
The Advocate • January 2014

Back to the Basics III: Noun-Sense

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Over the last few months, I’ve delved into broad writing tips. I’ve focused on big picture ideas like better briefs or even better sentences. I’ve received some very nice feedback and helpful comments on those columns.

But, I’ve also received some very nice feedback on my more basic columns. Since January is the time of year to settle in and, at least in my house, simplify after the holidays, I thought I would turn again to the basics.

Last summer, I wrote about the eight parts of speech and each part’s general characteristics. I’ve already covered the basics of verb tense last spring. So, this month, I bring you noun-sense. Let this column help you better understand both the basics and a little beyond the basics of how nouns function.

The basics

At the simplest level, nouns are names. They can be generic or proper:
Go up the street.

Turn left onto Main Street.

They can be people:
The judge wore a blue robe.

Chief Justice Burdick authored the Court’s opinion.

Or places:
The courtroom was full the first day of the trial.

The Idaho Supreme Court has original jurisdiction to hear certain claims.

Or things: Reporters contain cases.

Idaho Reports contains cases from the Idaho Supreme Court.

As things, they can be tangible or intangible:
The Idaho Code is the official codification of Idaho statutes.

Courts aim to protect the public good.

Nouns also have properties: number, gender, and person. A noun’s spelling usually changes for number. For instance, office changes spelling depending on whether it is singular or plural:

Come to my office.

This floor has fifteen offices.

Nouns rarely change spelling for gender:
I met with a female student and a male student yesterday.

Although, some nouns still have a gender differentiation:
I saw both a goose and a gander waddling down the road.

Nouns, however, never change spelling for person.

Jessica arrived last weekend.

How can you stand working with Tenielle?

Beyond the basics: Cases

Case is the feature that shows a noun’s function in a sentence. English nouns come in three cases: nominative, objective, and possessive. Nominative case indicates the noun is the subject or complement of a sentence. Objective case indicates the noun is the object or complement in a sentence. Present-day English nouns don’t change form in the nominative or objective case.

Possessive case is the only case where the noun might change spelling. If you think back to elementary school, you probably remember learning to indicate possession by adding an ‘s or s’ to the end of the noun.

Possessive nouns can indicate possession. When only the final
noun in the series changes spelling, 
the thing being possessed is owned 
collectively by each of the nouns 
named in the series.

The dinner party was at Ryan and 
Jenny’s house.
(Ryan and Jenny both own the 
house, even though Ryan did not 
change spelling.)

When each noun in the series 
changes spelling, however, the sen-
tence indicates that each noun owns 
a separate thing.

The judge read the plaintiff’s and de-
fendant’s briefs before the hearing.
(I would certainly hope that the 
plaintiff and defendant have separate 
b Briefs.)

But don’t think that possessives 
indicate only ownership. Possessive 
nouns can also indicate relation-
ships.

She is going to teach Tenielle’s stu-
dents today.
(I don’t actually own my students; 
I’m very opposed to slavery.)

We also use the possessive case in 
some very specific instances. First, 
use the possessive case to indicate 
a sense of measurement of time or 
value.

Landlords must give tenants three 
days’ notice to perform the actions 
necessary to save the lease.

This gives the sense of measure-
ment — notice of three days — so 
the possessive is correct.

Likewise, we use double posses-
sives to shift the focus of a sentence 
to the object. A double possessive is 
a sentence with both an of indicating 
possession and a noun in the posses-
sive case.

Chad was a friend of Abby’s.

This sentence focuses on Abby’s 
attitude, not Chad’s. We also use 
double possessives to avoid ambigu-
ity.

This is a picture of Rebecca’s.

Finally, nouns can be more than 
just one word and can be something 
other than a basic name. Grammar 
is completely functional, so usage 
in the sentence determines matters. 
Participles, phrases, and clauses can 
all function as nouns.

You may remember from last 
month’s column that a participle is 
a verb in the present tense. 
Writing is fun.

A phrase is a group of related 
words that lacks a subject and a pred-
icate, that doesn’t express a complete thought, and that acts as a single part 
of speech. Thus, phrases can func-
tion as nouns.

Walking alone at night can be danger-
ous.

Clauses, unlike phrases, contain 
both a subject and a predicate. Some 
express a complete thought and are 
sentences. Others don’t express com-
plete thoughts. These clauses can act 
as nouns.

That the criminal acted stupidly should 
surprise no one.

Just because a word is ordinarily 
classified as a noun doesn’t mean 
that’s how it’s functioning in the 
sentence. For instance, nouns can 
function as adjectives.

The litigation department needs an-
other attorney.

And finally, a noun in the posses-
sive case always functions as an ad-
djective.

The judge’s robe included a lace col-
lar.
(Judge’s modifies the robe in this 
sentence.)

**Conclusion**

So, remember both the basics of 
nouns, and a few tidbits that are be-
yond the basics. Both can help you understand how the words in a sen-
tence are functioning.

**Sources**

• Neal Whitman, Blog, Possessives, (post-
  www.quickanddirtytips.com/educa-
tion/grammar/possessives).

on Legal Style, 143-45 (2d ed. 2006).

**Endnotes**

1. In contrast, pronouns do change de-
pending on person. She arrived last 
weekend. (First person) How can you 
stand working with her? (Third person)

2. Present-day English retains changed 
forms for pronouns, however. For in-
stance, we use we for the subject of a 
sentence, but us for the object of a sen-
tence.

**About the Author**

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is an As-
Assistant Professor of Law and the Di-
rector of the Legal Research and Writ-
ing Program at Concordia University 
School of Law in Boise. She is also 
Of Counsel at Rainey Law Office, a 
boutique firm focusing on civil ap-
ppeals. You can reach her at tfordyce@
 cu-portland.edu or tfr@raineylawof-
lice.com.