

1-2014

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

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, Back to the Basics III: Noun-Sense, *Advocate*, Jan. 2014, at 64.

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.

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.¹

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.²

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 sentence indicates that each noun owns a separate thing.

The judge read the *plaintiff's* and *defendant's* briefs before the hearing.

(I would certainly hope that the plaintiff and defendant have separate briefs.)

But don't think that possessives indicate only ownership. Possessive nouns can also indicate relationships.

She is going to teach *Tenielle's* students 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 measurement — notice of three days — so the possessive is correct.

Likewise, we use double possessives 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 possessive 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 ambiguity.

This is a picture *of Rebecca's*.

This lets the reader know the picture belongs to Rebecca. Without the double possessive, the picture might be a snapshot showing Rebecca in all her glory (This is a picture of Rebecca). Of course, while this use is technically correct, the sentence could be rewritten to avoid the ambiguity and the double possessive.

This is Rebecca's picture.

This picture belongs to Rebecca.

Beyond the basics: Participles, phrases, and clauses (Oh my!)

Finally, nouns can be more than a single 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 predicate, that doesn't express a complete thought, and that acts as a single part of speech. Thus, phrases can function as nouns.

Walking alone at night can be dangerous.

Clauses, unlike phrases, contain both a subject and a predicate. Some express a complete thought and are sentences. Others don't express complete 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 another attorney.

And finally, a noun in the possessive case always functions as an adjective.

The *judge's* robe included a lace collar.

(Judge's modifies the robe in this sentence.)

Conclusion

So, remember both the basics of nouns, and a few tidbits that are beyond the basics. Both can help you understand how the words in a sentence are functioning.

Sources

- Neal Whitman, Blog, *Possessives*, (posted Mar. 29, 2012) (available at <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/possessives>).
- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style*, 143-45 (2d ed. 2006).

Endnotes

1. In contrast, pronouns do change depending 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 instance, we use *we* for the subject of a sentence, but *us* for the object of a sentence.

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Rainey Law Office, a boutique firm focusing on civil appeals. You can reach her at tfordyce@cu-portland.edu or tfr@raineylawoffice.com.