



Fetch me a pen

A Grammar for Writing across the Curriculum

What's in a name?

Nouns, pronouns and noun phrases

What's in a name?

Nouns, pronouns and noun phrases

Most students, and indeed teachers, would be able to tell you that a noun is a 'naming word' (or words) denoting, for instance, a **person** (*John, Aysha, Jacqueline Wilson, Isaac Newton*) **place** (*Great Britain, London, Tower Hamlets, the car park*) **thing** (*table, building, hospital*), **animal** (*black Labrador, elephant*) or **idea** (*truth, feminism, austerity*).

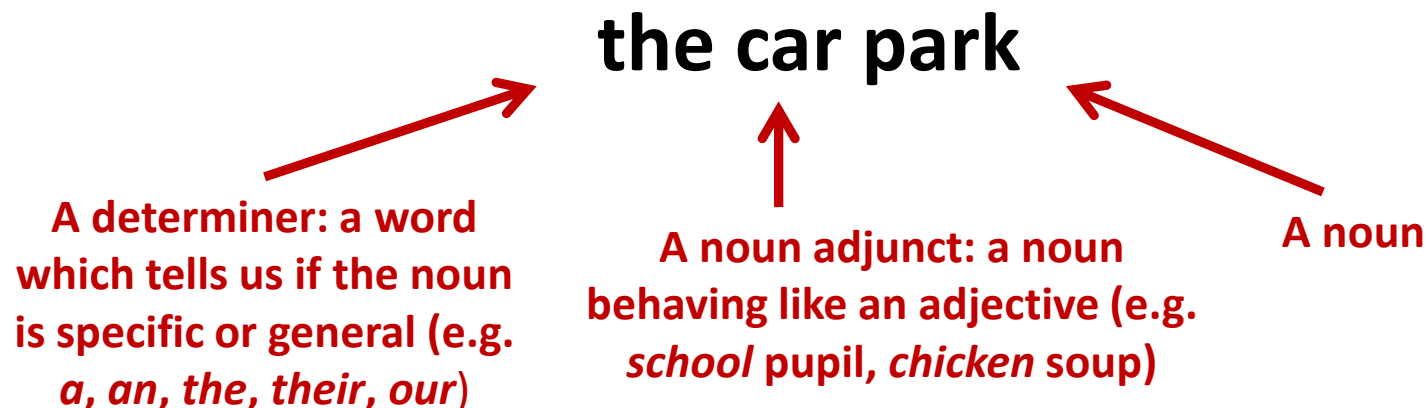
These examples above do not provide a complete definition of what a noun, or a 'noun phrase' is, as we will see...

Noun phrases

A 'noun phrase' is a broad term used to encompass:

- **single word nouns**
- **pronouns** (words that stand in place of nouns, such as *it, this, that, her, him, them*)
- **multi-word nouns** (i.e. phrases)

We've already looked at some examples of nouns that are comprised of more than one word (e.g. *the car park, Tower Hamlets*). Already, we can see that nouns phrases can contain words that are not nouns...



Building noun phrases

Fetch me a pen!

Noun phrases can be expanded (in theory, infinitely!) to incorporate many kinds of words and linguistic structures. Notice how, in each of these phrases, it is essentially the same thing (the car park) that is being named...

the car park

the dilapidated car park

Here, an adjective adds more information to the noun phrase.

the badly-lit, dilapidated car park

Here, another adjective (one in fact formed from an adverb and a verb) adds even more information.

the badly lit, dilapidated car park in the shabby part of town

In this example, a prepositional phrase, beginning with 'in', is locating the car park in question.

the badly-lit, dilapidated car park in the shabby part of town, which every responsible parent warns their child against

A relative clause, beginning with the determiner 'which', now modifies the phrase. The comma helps signal that it is the car park, rather than the part of town, that responsible parents warn their children against!

Noun phrases for academic writing

Why is it important to encourage pupils to build complex noun phrases?
Look at the following examples from different subject areas...

Noun	Noun Phrase	Expanded Noun Phrase
rhythm	the poem's rhythm	the poem's upbeat rhythm, created by the writer's use of iambic tetrameter
winds	westerly winds	westerly winds, which are strongest in the western hemisphere
cities	large cities	large cities that generate economic wealth

Each of the expanded noun phrases gives more information (allowing a student to display greater knowledge, understanding, ability to analyse/evaluate etc.) Examples like these enable students to begin to see language as a series of 'building blocks' that, though not especially complicated in themselves, can be developed to create sophisticated sentence structures.

Noun phrases for academic writing

Noun	Noun Phrase	Expanded Noun Phrase
rhythm	the poem's rhythm	the poem's upbeat rhythm, created by the writer's use of iambic tetrameter

(connective) subject

↓ ↓

Moreover, the poem's upbeat rhythm,
created by the writer's use of iambic
tetrameter, emphasises the jubilant tone of
the speaker.

↑ ↑

verb object

Pronouns

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns (or noun phrases)

To avoid repetition, we use a pronoun for the second mention (sometimes even the first – see below) of the same person, thing etc....

- **The dog** was barking. **It** was annoying.
- I heard **the fire alarm**. Did you hear **it**?
- I was thinking about **a quick snack**. Were you thinking about **that**, too?
- **She** had been dreading this moment. **Farzana** hated exams.
- **Romeo and Juliet** were selfish and only pleased **themselves**.

Pronouns are particularly common in speech. Because speakers and listeners usually have an explicit or tacit understanding of the thing or things being spoken about, they don't need to keep referring to them, and so use pronouns in their place.

Because of their frequency and usefulness in speech, school students often use pronouns in their writing instead of signalling in a clearer and more detailed way the thing being described...

Pronouns

Table 3. Clausal Subjects

<i>Text 1</i>	<i>Text 2</i>
The formation of sedimentary rocks	you
One type	you
water	she
these sediments	she
The second method	you
sedimentary rocks	she
	you
	I
	I

Schleppegrell, M. J. (2001) Linguistic features of the language of schooling

An investigation into kinds of clausal subjects (the 'main' thing named in a sentence).

Text 1: Clausal subjects in school-based, academic texts

Text 2: Clausal subjects in school students' speech

Table 2. Lexical Density

Text 1

1. The *formation* of *sedimentary rock* is *closely associated* with *water*.
 2. One *type forms*
 3. when *water carries soil, pebbles, and other particles* to the *ocean floor*
 4. where these *sediments* become *rock*.
 5. The second *method* involves *chemicals dissolved* in *water*.
 6. By *evaporation* and *precipitation* of *substances* like *calcium carbonate*, *sedimentary rocks* can *form*.
- Lexical density: $30/6 = 5.0$

Text 2

1. And um, like um sometimes if, um, like you *think* that the *teacher*?
 2. um, if you *raise* your *hand*
 3. and she *says* "No"
 4. so she'll *pick on* the *peoples* that don't *know* it?
 5. so you *raise* your *hand*
 6. she *picks* you
 7. and you *go*
 8. "Well, I *think*,
 9. I didn't, um, well."
 - ...
 10. That's what I *said*
 11. like the *people* *raise* their *hand*?
 12. and — and she — because they *think*
 13. they're going to *pick* the *person* who don't *know* it?
 14. and when she *picks* on you
 15. she *says*, ... "Oh."
- Lexical density: $23/15 = 1.5$

Table 1. Register Features of Spoken Interaction and School-Based Texts

	<i>Spoken interaction</i>	<i>School-based texts</i>
<i>Lexical features</i>		
Lexical choices	generic	specific, technical
Lexical density	sparse	dense, elaboration of noun phrases through modifiers, relative clauses, and prepositional phrases
Subjects	pronominal, present or known participants	lexical, nominalizations, and expanded NPs
<i>Grammatical strategies</i>		
Segmentation	prosodic segmentation: structure indicated prosodically	sentence structure: structure indicated syntactically
Mood	varied, attitude conveyed prosodically	mainly declarative, attitude conveyed lexically
Clause linkage and conjunction strategies	clause chaining with conjunctions, information added in finite segments, use of many conjunctions with generalized meanings	clause-combining strategies of embedding, use of verbs, prepositions, and nouns to make logical links, conjunctions have core (narrow) meanings
Organizational strategies	emergent structure, clause themes include conjunctive and discourse markers that segment and link part of text	hierarchical structure, using nominalization, logical links indicated through nominal, verbal, and adverbial expressions, and thematic elements that structure discourse

Schleppegrell, M. J. (2001) Linguistic features of the language of schooling

Avoiding the overuse of pronouns

While pronouns are in fact necessary for fluency and cohesion in academic (and other) writing, overusing them can mean writing lacks clarity and evidence of understanding. The following slides show two similar activities, one from the Thinking Writing Project at Queen Mary University, and the other from the English department at Mulberry School for Girls, that work on students' awareness of why precise, fully-developed noun phrases are useful and, ultimately, on their ability to use them.



Queen Mary
University of London

Academic Writing – Building stronger paragraphs (from QMUL Thinking Writing Project)

The effect of **this** is that the "body is turned into a thing, an object, a package" (Kilbourne). **They** are separated into individual parts: legs, breasts, thighs, waists. **It** is separated from the woman. It is acceptable for the woman's body to be scrutinized. **They** receive large amounts of attention and comment and are a "vehicle for the expression of a wide range of statements" (Orbach 13). Judgements are made and opinions are formed about a woman by her appearance. A woman who is judged as overweight is thought of as a woman with little self-control, and further assumptions are made. **This** occurs on a daily basis, by both men and women, and it affects the way we behave towards one another.

This activity supports the creation of cohesive, fluent paragraphs in academic writing. This paragraph has been adapted from a short extract from a sociology text, but has had crucial noun phrases removed from it and substituted with pronouns that, in this context, are vague (indicated in red).

Students are asked: a) what is good about the paragraph and (more importantly) b) what is wrong with it?

Hopefully, students realise that words like 'this', 'they' and 'it' create barriers to understanding exactly what the paragraph is about.

Academic Writing – Building stronger paragraphs (from QMUL Thinking Writing Project)

The effect of **current advertising methods** is that the "body is turned into a thing, an object, a package" (Kilbourne). **Bodies** are separated into individual parts: legs, breasts, thighs, waists; **the body** is separated from the woman. It is acceptable for the woman's body to be scrutinized. **Women's bodies** receive large amounts of attention and comment and are a "vehicle for the expression of a wide range of statements" (Orbach 13). Judgements are made and opinions are formed about a woman by her appearance. A woman who is judged as overweight is thought of as a woman with little self-control, and further assumptions are made. **This type of generalization** occurs on a daily basis, by both men and women, and it affects the way we behave towards one another.

Students now look at Version 2, the version that includes noun phrases that make what the paragraph is about explicit, and are asked how this improves the paragraph.

As with Version 1, pronouns or noun phrases are not already highlighted or emphasised. Students identify them for themselves through active reading and discussion.

Academic Writing – Building stronger paragraphs (from QMUL Thinking Writing Project)

The effect of **current advertising methods** is that the "body is turned into a thing, an object, a package" (Kilbourne). **In ads, bodies** are separated into individual parts: legs, breasts, thighs, waists; **the result is that the body** is separated from the woman. It **then** is acceptable for the woman's body to be scrutinized. **Women's bodies** receive large amounts of attention and comment and are a "vehicle for the expression of a wide range of statements" (Orbach 13). Judgements are made and opinions are formed about a woman by her appearance. A woman who is judged as overweight is thought of as a woman with little self-control, and **from this premise** further assumptions are made. **This type of generalization** occurs on a daily basis, by both men and women, and it affects the way we behave towards one another.

As an extension activity, Version 3 examines how other cohesive devices (the words and phrases indicated in blue writing) are able to further strengthen the paragraph in terms of fluency and cohesion.

Again, students work together to notice these words and phrases for themselves.

Q: Is the narrator shown to be making careful choices at the beginning of 'The Laboratory'?

He uses various techniques to suggest that **she** is making choices in a rash and sudden manner. Firstly we notice the rhythm and rhyme of the poem. **It** is quite playful and **it** is AABB rhyme scheme which gives **it** a childlike tone. This reflects **her** state of mind; the playful feel suggests she is gaining pleasure from **it**. Alternatively, **this** could suggest she has lost her mind. The stanzas are structured in the same way and it could be argued that **this** shows her to be very careful and calculating, however the strong rhyme gives more of a sense that she is enjoying **this**. **This** does not suggest careful choices.

Task: Replace 'he', 'she', 'it', 'this' etc. with nouns or noun phrases to make the writing more precise, logical and convincing!

In this activity, used to prepare KS4 students at Mulberry for GCSE English Literature coursework, students have to replace the imprecise noun phrases (indicated in purple) with words that aid precision, logic and cohesion and, ultimately knowledge and understanding.

As with the previous activity, students may be given a version of this paragraph without the pronouns indicated, and asked which kinds of words make the writing unsatisfactory.

Q: Is the narrator shown to be making careful choices at the beginning of 'The Laboratory'?

He uses various techniques to suggest that **she** is making choices in a rash and sudden manner. Firstly we notice the rhythm and rhyme of the poem. **It** is quite playful and **it** is AABB rhyme scheme which gives **it** a childlike tone. This reflects **her** state of mind; the playful feel suggests she is gaining pleasure from **it**. Alternatively, **this** could suggest she has lost her mind. The stanzas are structured in the same way and it could be argued that **this** shows her to be very careful and calculating, however the strong rhyme gives more of a sense that she is enjoying **this**. **This** does not suggest careful choices.

this uniform structure, **the protagonist**, the poet, **the narrator**, the plan, **these rhyming couplets**, her plotting, **the poem**, the jaunty effect, **gaining enjoyment from such an evil plan**, the verse form

For particular classes or students, this could be run as a cloze activity; i.e. pupils may be given the appropriate nouns and noun phrases so they can decide exactly where in the paragraph they belong (as above).

Q: Is the narrator shown to be making careful choices at the beginning of 'The Laboratory'?

The poet uses various techniques to suggest that **the protagonist** is making choices in a rash and sudden manner. Firstly we notice the rhythm and rhyme of the poem. **The verse form** is quite playful and **the rhyming couplets are arranged in an** AABB rhyme scheme which gives **the poem** a childlike tone. This reflects **the narrator's** state of mind; the playful feel suggests she is gaining pleasure from **her plan**. Alternatively, **the jaunty effect** could suggest she has lost her mind. The stanzas are structured in the same way and it could be argued that **this uniform structure** shows her to be very careful and calculating, however the strong rhyme gives more of a sense that she is enjoying **her plotting**. **Gaining enjoyment from such an evil plan** does not suggest careful choices.

A model of a good paragraph with precise noun phrases included for clarity and cohesion. Another amendment to the paragraph, again aiding clarity, is indicated in blue.

How to create a noun phrase activity: An example from Geography

Glaciers develop over many years in places where snow has fallen but not melted. **Snow** is compacted and turns to ice. **The weight of the ice** means that it starts to slip down mountain sides over time. **A glacier** is a system. There is a zone of accumulation where snow is added. **The part of the glacier which gains snow** is normally at the start of a glacier in a highland area. As **more and more snow** falls, it is compacted so the bottom layers become ice. **The ice that has formed** then moves downhill due to the force of gravity. Near the end, or snout, of the glacier **this ice** may melt. **The part of the glacier where this happens** is called the zone of ablation and **this process** is more likely to occur in warm summer months.

Step 1: Find a text related to the topic you're teaching, or create your own. It should preferably be the kind of writing you want your students to be able to create (i.e. a recount, description, analysis, argument etc.) Highlight nouns and noun phrases that are crucial to the clarity, logic and cohesion of the text.



How to create a noun phrase activity: An example from Geography

They develop over many years in places where snow has fallen but not melted. **It** is compacted and turns to ice. **This** means that it starts to slip down mountain sides over time. **It** is a system. There is a zone of accumulation where snow is added. **This** is normally at the start of a glacier in a highland area. As **it** falls, it is compacted so the bottom layers become ice. **This** then moves downhill due to the force of gravity. Near the end, or snout, of the glacier **it** may melt. **This** is called the zone of ablation and **it** is more likely to occur in warm summer months.

Step 2: Now, simply replace the nouns and noun phrases with imprecise pronouns. Present students with the new version of the text (this could form a starter activity or an activity in preparation for writing) and ask them what's making the text difficult to understand, having them identify the kind of words (pronouns) that create confusion.



How to create a noun phrase activity: An example from Geography

They develop over many years in places where snow has fallen but not melted. **It** is compacted and turns to ice. **This** means that it starts to slip down mountain sides over time. **It** is a system. There is a zone of accumulation where snow is added. **This** is normally at the start of a glacier in a highland area. As **it** falls, it is compacted so the bottom layers become ice. **This** then moves downhill due to the force of gravity. Near the end, or snout, of the glacier **it** may melt. **This** is called the zone of ablation and **it** is more likely to occur in warm summer months.

this part of the glacier, **the weight of the ice**, a glacier, **the part of the glacier which gains snow**, this ice, **glaciers**, more and more snow, **the ice that has formed**, this process

Step 3: Once students have identified the pronouns which make the writing difficult to fully comprehend, have them change the pronouns to precise nouns or noun phrases. Depending on your class or students in it, you might give them the kinds of words and phrases needed (see above), effectively making this a cloze activity.



How to create a noun phrase activity: An example from Science

The reproductive system of a child is not mature and needs to change as **a boy or girl** develops into an adult, so that the system is fully working. **These changes** begin between the ages of ten and fifteen. **The time when the changes happen** is called puberty. **The transformations** happen because of sex hormones produced by the testes in boys and by the ovaries in girls. **Some of these developments** happen in boys and girls, while others just happen in boys or girls.

Step 1: Find a text related to the topic you're teaching, or create your own. It should preferably be the kind of writing you want your students to be able to create (i.e. a recount, description, analysis, argument etc.) Highlight nouns and noun phrases that are crucial to the clarity, logic and cohesion of the text.



How to create a noun phrase activity: An example from Science

It is not mature and needs to change as **they** develop into an adult, so that the system is fully working. **It** begins between the ages of ten and fifteen. **This** is called puberty. **It** happens because of sex hormones produced by the testes in boys and by the ovaries in girls. **Some** happen in boys and girls, while others just happen in boys or girls.

Step 2: Now, simply replace the nouns and noun phrases with imprecise pronouns. Present students with the new version of the text (this could form a starter activity or an activity in preparation for writing) and ask them what's making the text difficult to understand, having them identify the kind of words (pronouns) that create confusion.

*Notice that, when changing plural noun phrases ('*these changes*', '*the transformations*') to singular pronouns like 'it', verbs need to be modified accordingly. *Begin* becomes *begins* and *happen* becomes *happens*.



How to create a noun phrase activity: An example from Science

It is not mature and needs to change as **they** develop into an adult, so that the system is fully working. **It** begins between the ages of ten and fifteen. **This** is called puberty. **It** happens because of sex hormones produced by the testes in boys and by the ovaries in girls. **Some** happen in boys and girls, while others just happen in boys or girls.

these changes, **some of these developments**, the reproductive system of a child, **the time when the changes happen**, a boy or girl, **the transformations**

Step 3: Once students have identified the pronouns which make the writing difficult to fully comprehend, have them change the pronouns to precise nouns or noun phrases. Depending on your class or students in it, you might give them the kinds of words and phrases needed (see above), effectively making this a cloze activity.

*You might leave verb endings highlighted in blue, explaining to students that the singular 'it' needs to be replaced with a plural noun phrase.

