



What Is a Noun Phrase? Definitions & Examples

Every sentence in English includes a noun phrase.

A noun phrase can be:

1. a singular noun (a person, place, thing, or idea):

- woman
- town
- car

2. a group of words that has a noun as its main word:

- the car (article + noun)
- some cars (determiner + noun)
- the red car (article + adjective + noun)
- the big red car that was parked on the corner (article + adjectives + noun + relative clause)

Components of a Noun Phrase

A noun phrase can have lots of different words, but it must always include a noun.

These words can come before the noun (modifiers), or after the noun (postmodifiers).

They include articles, pronouns, adjectives, prepositional phrases, relative clauses and infinitive clauses.

Types of modifiers include:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Articles | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the bag• a dog |
| Possessive pronouns | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• my time• your house• their car |
| Determiners | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• some books• a lot of bags• many dogs• every time• most days• both options• a few books |
| Adjectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the blue bag• a happy dog• some heavy books |
| Other nouns | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• summer holiday• coffee mug |
| Gerunds | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• running shoes• shopping bag |



Postmodifiers can include:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Prepositional phrases | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the blue bag on the table• a happy dog in the park• my own time at the beach• some heavy books at school |
| Relative clauses | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the blue bag that I bought yesterday• a happy dog who was wagging his tail• my own time when I can finally relax• some heavy books that I need to return to the library |
| Infinitive clauses | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the blue bag to take on my trip• a happy dog to greet you at the door• my own time to focus on my projects• some heavy books to carry upstairs |



The Role of the Head Noun

A noun phrase always needs a noun. We call the main noun 'the head noun'.

For example:

- **dog** (head noun)
- **small** dog (adjective 'small' adds detail)
- **small, brown** dog (adjectives 'small' and 'brown' add more detail)
- NOT: ~~small brown~~

Simple and Complex Noun Phrases

Noun phrases can be simple or complex.

Simple noun phrases

Simple noun phrases can include:

- an article and a noun (*'the dog'*)
- a determiner and a noun (*'some dogs'*)
- an article, adjective and a noun (*'the small dog'*)

Complex noun phrases

A complex noun phrase usually means there's more than just a simple determiner + noun. This can include:

- multiple adjectives and a noun (*'the small, brown dog'*)
- prepositional phrases and a noun (*'the dog in the car'*)
- infinitive clauses and a noun (*'the dog to watch out for'*)
- relative clauses after the noun (*'the dog that you adopted'*)



Let's look at both in more detail below:

Simple Noun Phrase Examples

A simple noun phrase usually uses articles, possessive pronouns, determiners or adjectives before the noun.

	Modifier(s)
The cat sat down.	the - article
My friend is coming to visit.	my - possessive pronoun
Some books are on the table.	some - determiner
We spent a lot of money .	a lot of - determiner
A red apple fell from the tree.	a - article red - adjective

Complex Noun Phrase Examples

A complex noun phrase adds extra information to the head noun. It can include multiple adjectives, prepositional phrases, clauses, or relative clauses. Although it is longer, the entire noun phrase still acts as one single unit.

Remember: There can be more than one noun in a noun phrase. However, the head noun is the main noun that the whole phrase is built around. Other nouns inside the phrase often give extra information about it (for example, in prepositional phrases or relative clauses), but they are not the head noun.

Modifier(s) + postmodifiers

The small brown dog with a blue collar barked loudly.

the - article
small, brown - adjectives
with a blue collar - prepositional phrase

A plan to catch the thief was carefully prepared.

a - article
to catch the thief - infinitive clause

The woman who was serving drinks at the party smiled politely.

the - article
who was serving drinks - relative clause
at the party - prepositional phrase

Several heavy books on the top shelf need to be returned.

several - quantifier
heavy - adjective
on the top shelf - prepositional phrase

My own time to relax after a long week is so important.

my - possessive pronoun
own - adjective
to relax after a long week - infinitive clause

How to Identify a Noun Phrase in a Sentence

A noun phrase can either be the subject or the object. Remember:

A subject is the person or thing who *does* the action.

- **The cat** eats salmon.

An object is who or what *receives* the action.

- I feed **the cat** every morning.

If you want to know if a group of words is a noun phrase, you can use the 'pronoun substitution test'. If you can replace the group of words with a single pronoun (*he, she, it, they*), it is a noun phrase.

For example, here we can replace 'a cup of tea' with 'it' and the sentences still make sense.

- **A cup of tea** would be perfect right now. → **It** would be perfect right now. (subject)
- I would love **a cup of tea**. → I would love **it**. (object)

Here are some more examples:

- **The ancient castle on the hill** is so beautiful. → **It** is so beautiful. (subject)
- I saw **the ancient castle on the hill**. → I saw **it**. (object)

- **The tall man in the black coat** waved to us. → **He** waved to us. (subject)
- I invited **the tall man in the black coat**. → I invited **him**. (object)

In the example 'The tall man in the black coat waved to us', notice how the prepositional phrase 'in the black coat' is part of the noun phrase because it modifies **the man** (or it describes him).



The noun phrase is:

- **the** = article
- **tall** = adjective
- **man** = head noun
- **in the black coat** = prepositional phrase modifying the noun

The prepositional phrase is inside the noun phrase because it helps us identify the man (the one in the black coat).

However, sometimes a sentence contains both a noun phrase and a prepositional phrase, but they are separate phrases.

Look at this example:

- The man followed me to the top of the road.

Here, **the man** is a complete noun phrase:

- **the** = article
- **man** = head noun

And **the road** is also a complete noun phrase:

- **the** = article
- **road** = head noun

Here, 'to the top of the road' is a separate prepositional phrase. It is not part of the noun phrase because it tells us *where* something happened instead of describing or modifying the head noun.

So when you identify a noun phrase, remember that not every group of words around the noun is a noun phrase. A prepositional phrase can sometimes be part of a noun phrase if it describes the noun, but it can also be a separate phrase that gives extra information about the action, such as where, when, or how something happens.



Conclusion

A noun phrase is a group of words that work as the subject or object of a sentence. They always need a head noun, and they can have modifiers and postmodifiers to add more detail. These can include articles, adjectives, prepositional phrases and relative clauses.

Complex noun phrases are a great way to add detail to both your writing and speaking.

A noun phrase helps you describe something clearly without needing to start a new sentence.