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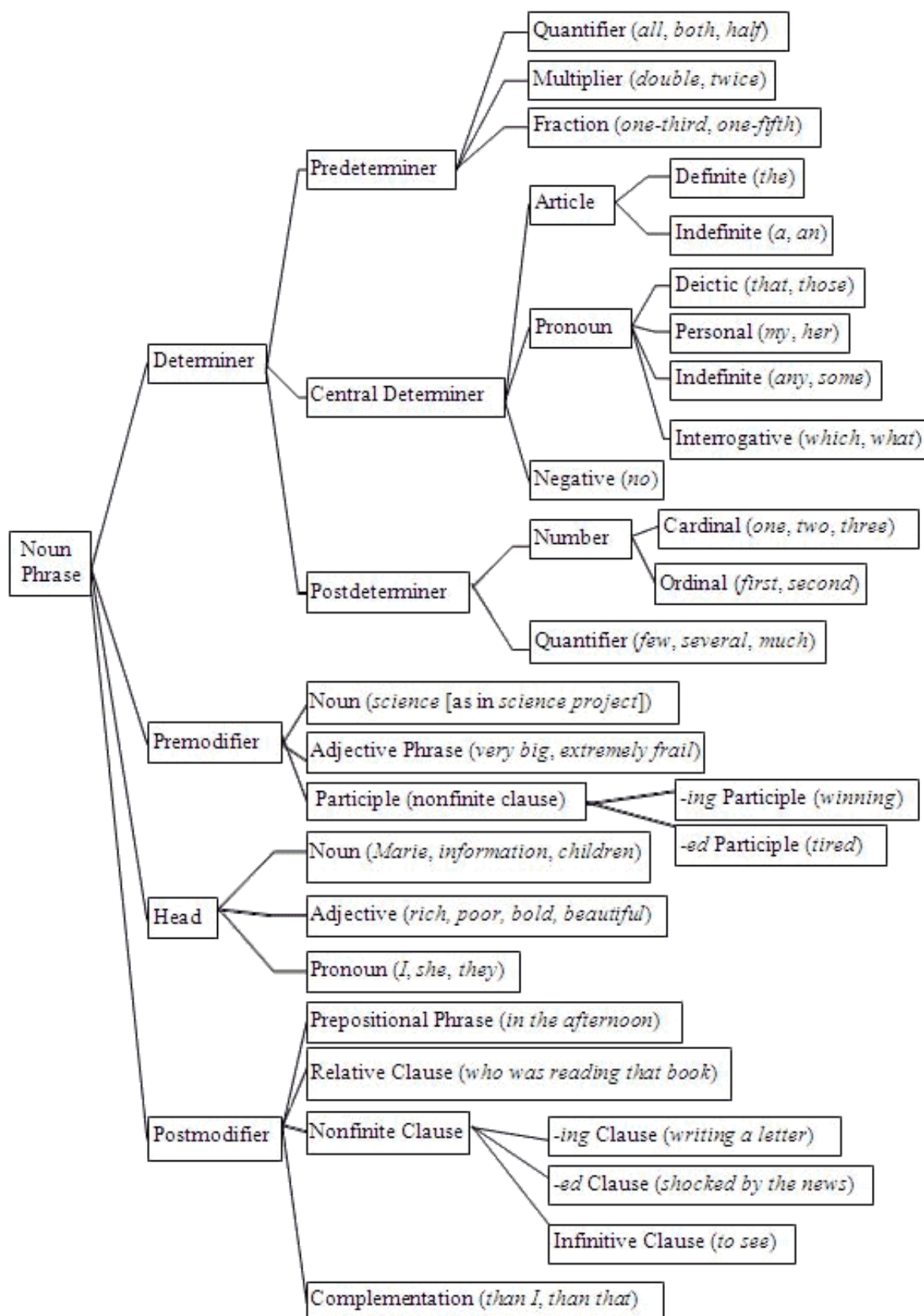**Modern English Grammar**   [Contact Form](#)
English 2126

The Noun Phrase

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LIKE ALL PHRASES, THE CONSTITUENTS OF THE ENGLISH NOUN PHRASE CAN BE ANALYZED into both functional constituents and formal constituents. From a functional point of view, the noun phrase has four major components, occurring in a fixed order:

- the *determinative*, that constituent which determines the reference of the noun phrase in its linguistic or situational context;
- *premodification*, which comprises all the modifying or describing constituents before the head, other than the determiners;
- the *head*, around which the other constituents cluster; and
- *postmodification*, those which comprise all the modifying constituents placed after the head.

IN THE DIAGRAM BELOW, NOTICE THAT EACH FUNCTIONAL COMPONENT OF A NOUN PHRASE (NP) can be further subclassified as we trace the diagram from left to right until we find that we have form classes (of the kind we discussed above) filling each constituent category.

Noun Phrase

- **Determiner**
  - **Predeterminer**
    - Quantifier (*all, both, half*)
    - Multiplier (*double, twice*)
    - Fraction (*one-third, one-fifth*)
  - **Central Determiner**
    - Article
      - Definite (*the*)
      - Indefinite (*a, an*)
    - Pronoun
      - Deictic (*that, those*)
      - Personal (*my, her*)
      - Indefinite (*any, some*)
      - Interrogative (*which, what*)
    - Negative (*no*)
  - **Postdeterminer**
    - Number
      - Cardinal (*one, two, three*)
      - Ordinal (*first, second*)
    - Quantifier (*few, several, much*)
- **Premodifier**
  - Noun (*science* [as in *science project*])
  - Adjective Phrase (*very big, extremely frail*)
  - Participle (nonfinite clause)
    - -*ing* Participle (*winning*)
    - -*ed* Participle (*tired*)
- **Head**
  - Noun (*Marie, information, children*)
  - Adjective (*rich, poor, bold, beautiful*)
  - Pronoun (*I, she, they*)
- **Postmodifier**
  - Prepositional Phrase (*in the afternoon*)
  - Relative Clause (*who was reading that book*)
  - Nonfinite Clause
    - -*ing* Clause (*writing a letter*)
    - -*ed* Clause (*shocked by the news*)
    - Infinitive Clause (*to see*)
  - Complementation (*than I, than that*)

Depending on the context of situation, we choose determiners and modifiers according to our needs in identifying and specifying the referent of the NP. Sometimes we need several determiners and modifiers to clarify the referent (*all my books in that box*); sometimes we need none at all (*Liz*).

That diagram is one way to represent the dual nature of a phrase. Each phrase, remember, is a merger of both form and function, and, as complex as it looks, the diagram illustrates only some of the complexities of the noun phrase in English. (For a more thorough treatment, see Halliday 1994 and Quirk *et al.* 1985.) Another way to illustrate some of the possible arrangements of form and function in the noun phrase is presented in the table below.

Some Examples of the Noun Phrase in English						
FUNCTION		*Determiner*	*Premodifier*	*Head*	*Postmodifier*	
	(a)			lions		
E	(b)	the		young		
X	(c)	the	information	age		
A	(d)			each	of the children	
M	(e)	some	badly needed	time	with the family	
P	(f)	this		conclusion	to the story	
L	(g)	all my		children		
E	(h)	several	new mystery	books	which we recently enjoyed	
S	(i)	such a	marvelous	data bank	filled with information	
	(j)	a	better	person	than I	
FORMS		*Pronoun*	*Participle*	*Noun*	*Prepositional Phrase*	
		Article	*Noun*	*Adjective*	*Relative Clause*	
		Quantifier	*Adjective Phrase*	*Pronoun*	*Nonfinite Clause*	
					Complementation	

Notice that several form classes (i.e., word classes) can be "reused," meaning that the same form class (= word class) can take multiple functional roles inside the same noun phrase. For example, in the noun phrase, it is possible to use quantifiers to function as pre-determiners or as post-determiners. Similarly, it is possible to use a noun (functioning as premodifier in a noun phrase) and another noun (functioning as the head of that same noun phrase), as in *information age*. This kind of "recycling" is known as *recursion*. Notice also that phrases and even whole clauses can be "recycled" into the noun phrase. This process of placing a phrase of clause within another phrase or clause is called *embedding*. It is through the processes of recursion and embedding that we are able to take a finite number of forms (words and phrases) and construct an infinite number of expressions. Furthermore, embedding also allows us to construct an infinitely long structure, in theory anyway.

For example, the nursery rhyme "The House That Jack Built" plays on the process of embedding in English noun phrases. The nursery rhyme is one sentence that continuously grows by embedding more and more relative clauses as postmodifiers in the noun phrase that ends the sentence:

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the mouse that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cat that scared the mouse that ate the malt hat lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the dog that chased the cat that scared the mouse that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the boy who loves the dog that chased the cat that scared the mouse that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

And so on. In theory, we could go on forever because language relies so heavily on embedding.

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