

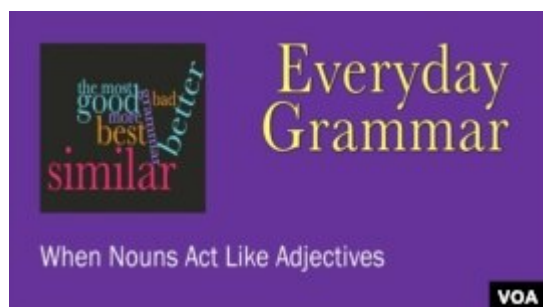
When Nouns Act Like Adjectives

Welcome back to Everyday Grammar from VOA Learning English.

The English language has an interesting way of classifying words. We organize words by their **function** or purpose. These functions are **parts of speech**. You might find that a noun acts like a verb, as with the word *impact*. Once you would talk about something having an *impact*. This is the noun form of *impact*. Now you can say you want to *impact* a decision process. That is the verb form of *impact*.

You know that an adjective **modifies**, describing a quality of a noun. For example, you drink a cup of *hot tea*. The adjective is *hot* and the noun is *tea*. What about *lemon tea*? *Lemon* is a noun, isn't it? Why is it modifying *tea*?

English often uses nouns as adjectives - to modify other nouns. For example, a car that people drive in races is a *race car*. A car with extra power or speed is a *sports car*. Nouns that modify other nouns are called adjectival nouns or noun modifiers. For our purposes, they are called **attributive nouns**. So we will use that term.



EG: Main - When Nouns Act Like Adjectives

Did you notice something unusual about the expressions with the noun *car*? A car used to race other cars is a *race car*. Both nouns are singular. A car that has power and speed is a *sports car*. Why is the first noun, *sports*, plural? A search of the Internet shows us that people started using this phrase back in 1914. Cars were a new thing then.

There is no rule about whether the attributive noun is singular or plural. Most of the time it is singular. But if the combination of nouns includes a plural noun, it usually stays that way. The result is phrases like *ladies room* – not ~~*lady room*~~, for a room meant for women and girls, and *bean soup* but not ~~*beans soup*~~ for a soup made of beans.

Some grammar experts think that English speakers are using more plural nouns in this way. We have *arms* race, *benefits* office, and *women* leaders. At times, a singular noun changes the meaning. An *arts* degree recognizes completion of a study program at a college or university in the humanities (or liberal arts). But an *art* degree is a degree in the fine arts.

When writing these attributive nouns in English, learners sometimes wonder about whether to use an **apostrophe** to show possession. Is it a *ladies' room*? No, it is a *ladies room*. Attributive nouns do not need the apostrophe. So we write *Veterans Day* in American English and not *Veteran's Day* or *Veterans' Day*. That means the day is in honor of military veterans, not owned by veterans.

Try to identify the attributive nouns George Harrison uses in The Beatles' song *Piggies*.

*Everywhere there's lots of piggies
Living piggy lives
You can see them out for dinner
With their piggy wives
Clutching forks and knives
To eat their bacon*

For Learning English Everyday Grammar, I'm Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this story for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Words in This Story

part of speech – *grammar*: a class of words (such as adjectives, adverbs, nouns and verbs) that are ordered by the kinds of ideas they express and the way they work in a sentence

impact – *v.* to have a strong and often bad effect on (something or someone) *n.* a powerful or major influence or effect

attributive – *grammar*: joined directly to a noun in order to describe it

modify – *grammar*: to limit or describe the meaning of (a word or words)

apostrophe – *n.* the punctuation mark ' ; used to show the possessive form of a noun or to show that letters or numbers are missing

Now it's your turn. Write a sentence that uses an attributive noun in the comments section.