

Compound nouns and noun phrases

Reminder → H4– H12

A

In a compound consisting of **noun + noun**, often the second noun gives the general class of things to which the compound belongs and the first noun indicates the type within this class. The first noun usually has a singular form:

- an address book** (= a book for addresses; *not* an addresses book)

However, there are a number of exceptions. These include –

☆ when the first noun only has a plural form:

- a savings account** **a customs officer** **a clothes shop** (compare **a shoe shop**)
the arms trade (arms = weapons) **a glasses case** (glasses = spectacles. Compare 'a glass case' = a case made of glass) **an arts festival** (arts = music, drama, film, dance, painting, etc. Compare 'an art festival'; art = painting, drawing and sculpture)

☆ when we refer to an institution (an industry, department, etc.), such as

- the building materials industry** **the publications department**
 which deals with more than one kind of item or activity (different types of building material, different forms of publication).

Note that to make a compound noun plural we usually make the second noun plural:

- coal mine(s)** **office-worker(s)** **tea leaf / leaves**

B

Sometimes a **noun + noun** is not appropriate and instead we use **noun + -'s + noun** (possessive form) or **noun + preposition + noun**. In general, we prefer **noun + -'s + noun** –

☆ when the first noun is the user (a person or animal) of the item in the second noun:

- a baby's bedroom** **a lion's den** **a women's clinic** **a girls' school** **birds' nests**

☆ when the item in the second noun is produced by the thing (often an animal) in the first:

- goat's cheese** **duck's eggs** **cow's milk** (but note **lamb chops** and **chicken drumsticks**)

☆ when we talk about parts of people or animals; but we usually use **noun + noun** to talk about parts of things. Compare:

- a woman's face** **a boy's arm** *but* **a pen top** **a computer keyboard**

We prefer **noun + preposition + noun** –

☆ when we talk about some kind of container together with its contents. Compare:

- a cup of tea** (= a cup with tea in it) *and* **a tea cup** (= a cup for drinking tea from)

☆ when the combination of nouns does not refer to a well-known class of items. Compare:

- income tax** (a recognised class of tax) *and* **a tax on children's clothes** (*rather than* 'a children's clothes tax')

C

Some compound nouns are made up of verbs and prepositions or adverbs, and may be related to a two- or three-word verb (see Unit 94). Compare:

- Mansen **broke out** of the prison by dressing as a woman. (= escaped) *and*
 There was a major **break-out** from the prison last night. (= prisoners escaped)

Countable compound nouns like this have a plural form ending in **-s**:

- read-out(s)** **push-up(s)** **intake(s)** **outcome(s)**

However, there are exceptions. For example:

- looker(s)-on** (*or onlooker[s]*) **runner(s)-up** **passer(s)-by** **hanger(s)-on**

D

We can form other kinds of hyphenated phrases that are placed before nouns to say more precisely what the noun refers to:

- a **state-of-the-art** (= very modern) tablet PC **up-to-date** information

Exercises

43.1 If necessary, correct the italicised words. A & B

- 1 Ali worked for a long time in (a) *the parks department*, but a few years ago he retrained, and now he's (b) *a computers programmer*. Of course, what he really wants to be is (c) *a films star!*
- 2 I was waiting at (a) *the bus stop* this morning when a cyclist on her way to the (b) *girl school* up the road got knocked off her bike. Someone got out of a car without looking and (c) *the car's door* hit her. She was very lucky not to be badly hurt, although she did have (d) *a head cut*.
- 3 I shouldn't be long at (a) *the corner shop*. I've just got three things on my (b) *shopping list* – (c) *a milk bottle*, (d) *a biscuit packet*, and (e) *some teethpaste*. I'll also look for (f) *some goat's cheese*, but I don't think they'll have any.
- 4 The tracks on his latest CD range from (a) *love songs* to (b) *pollution songs*.
- 5 Marta hated going into her grandfather's old (a) *tools shed*. It was full of (b) *spider webs*.
- 6 When Jake was cleaning his (a) *armschair*, he found a lot of things that had slipped down the back. There was an old (b) *pen top*, a piece from (c) *the 500-pieces jigsaw puzzle* that his daughter had been doing, and his (d) *glass case* with his sunglasses inside.

43.2 Underline the two-word verbs in sentences 1–4, then complete sentences 5–8 with the corresponding compound nouns. C

- 1 Nathan tried to cover up the fact that he had gambled and lost most of his money.
- 2 It is reported that cholera has broken out in the refugee camp.
- 3 I'm flying to Sydney, but I'm stopping over in Singapore for a few days on the way.
- 4 On the first Friday of each month, a few of us get together and go ten-pin bowling.
- 5 The minister was taken ill in Iceland during a short on his way back to Canada.
- 6 We didn't have a big party for Jo's 50th birthday, just a family
- 7 Allegations of a of a major leak of radioactive waste from the nuclear power plant have been strongly denied by the Energy Ministry.
- 8 Only two years ago there was a serious of malaria in the town.

43.3 Match the halves of these phrases, then use them to complete the sentences below. The meaning of the correct phrase is given in brackets. D

~~day-to-~~ ~~down-to-~~ ~~larger-than-~~ ~~man / woman-in-the-~~
~~once-in-a-~~ ~~step-by-~~ ~~middle-of-the-~~ ~~round-the~~

~~clock~~ ~~day-~~ ~~earth~~ ~~life~~ ~~lifetime~~ ~~road~~ ~~step~~ ~~street~~

- 1 Although the Managing Director of Transcom was involved in major decisions, she left the day-to-day running of the company to her staff. (*routine*)
- 2 The party will never regain power unless it can persuade voters that it has rid itself of corruption. (*not politically extreme*)
- 3 Since the attempt to assassinate him last year, the Defence Minister has been given protection by the police. (*all day and all night*)
- 4 The bookcase came with simple, instructions on how to assemble it. (*progressing from one stage to the next*)
- 5 When the comet passes close to Earth next week, scientists will have a opportunity to study its effects on our atmosphere. (*very rare*)
- 6 Eleni has a refreshing, approach to management. She's much less concerned with theory than with getting things done in the most efficient way possible. (*practical*)
- 7 The isn't interested in the finer points of the government's tax policy. They just want to know if they are going to take home more or less pay. (*ordinary person*)
- 8 Her father was a character who was well known throughout the village for his eccentric way of dressing and outspoken views. (*more exaggerated than usual*)