

English grammar

Compound nouns

Grammar rules with examples

A compound noun is a noun that is formed from two or more unique words and has a more specific meaning than the separate words. The compound word can be written as separate words (*mother tongue*), as a single word (*grandmother*) or with hyphens (*mother-in-law*).

Types of compound nouns

- Open compound nouns = separate words:
swimming pool, first aid, hot dog
- Closed compound nouns = a single word:
grandmother, snowball, railway
- Hyphenated compound nouns = words connected with hyphens:
check-in, mother-in-law, merry-go-round

Possible combinations

We can combine various parts of speech to make compound nouns.

Noun + noun:

traffic warden, petrol station, shop window
seaside, website, Iceland
hitch-hiker, fire-fly, paper-clip

Adjective + noun:

small talk, full moon, last will
blackbird, hardware, greenhouse

Combinations with gerunds:

fruit picking, gold mining, waiting list, driving licence
trainspotting, haircutting, storytelling
price-fixing, weight-lifting, dining-room

Combinations with prepositions:

output, checkout, onlooker
passer-by, check-in, father-in-law

Open compound nouns

The open compound noun is made up of two words that are written as separate words but their combination creates a new, single meaning.

air force, fairy tale, street lamp, goose bumps, first aid, hot dog, remote control, fire engine, bank clerk, prime minister, credit card

Closed compound nouns

The closed compound noun combines two words that are written as one word with a new meaning.

airmail, banknote, billboard, earthworm, honeymoon, keyboard, outlook, overcoat, painkiller, password, rainbow, runway, sweetheart, swordfish

Hyphenated compound nouns

The hyphenated compound noun is a combination of two or more words that are connected with hyphens. They are less common in modern English than in the past.

co-worker, editor-in-chief, hanger-on, happy-go-lucky, mass-production, passer-by, runner-up, word-of-mouth, forget-me-not

Plurals of compound nouns

We normally add -s to the last part of a compound noun to make the plural.

*a shop window, two shop windows
a blackbird, a few blackbirds
a hitch-hiker, many hitch-hikers*

But there are a few exceptions to this rule.

*a passer-by, two passers-by (but two grown-ups)
a woman doctor, several women doctors (but several female doctors)
a sister-in-law, all my sisters-in-law (but merry-go-rounds)*

Compound words in transition

There are no clear rules how to form a compound noun in English. With the relaxed attitude toward spelling, a lot of compound nouns gradually develop. A good dictionary will help you to find out how to write a compound word.

*all right | alright
back yard | back-yard | backyard
check in | check-in*

Compound nouns exercises:

www.e-grammar.org/compound-nouns-exercises/

Our tip: www.e-grammar.org/pdf-books/ All PDF exercises + grammar rules in one place.