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## Academic English

# Nominal groups: nouns & their structure

### WHAT ARE NOUNS?

Nouns are one of the types of words which are used in academic writing. However, before we can begin our discussion, you will need to have a clear understanding of what a noun is. Nouns are the people, places, or things in a text such as *John*, *the corner store*, *fruit*. The ‘things’ can be concrete, tangible objects, or they can be abstract ones such as *the decision*, *the increase*. Our example *the corner store* shows us that a noun can include more information than just the ‘thing’ itself: *corner* describes the kind of store. We will be referring to nouns and noun phrases such as *the corner store* as nominal groups.

Nominal groups are important because they typically provide the content in a text (what something is about), and in academic writing this content can be very sophisticated and complex. What’s more, the nominal groups in academic writing are often nominalisations: this means they have been formed by turning a verb such as *decide* into a thing/noun *decision*. Adverbs and adjectives can also become nouns. Here are some examples of nominal groups from academic writing:

*people*  
*the major policy priority*  
*the establishment of the Union Club in Sydney*  
*the rate of economic growth*  
*the practice of responsible government in Britain*

and a very long one:

*The conventional wisdom which interpreted Australian social history as the working out of the egalitarian radicalism of the nineteenth century came under sustained attack from a number of writers in the 1950's and 60's.*

As you can see from our long example, the nominal group can expand to include a wide range of information. Let’s now take a closer look at the structure of the nominal group.

### WHAT TYPE OF INFORMATION CAN GO AROUND THE MAIN NOUN?

The term nominal group refers to a noun and other words around the noun which further describe and classify it: for example,

*the difficult university entrance examination*

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The head noun is ***examination***: it tells us what the nominal group is about. The other information describes and classifies the examination: ***university entrance*** classifies the type of examination, while ***difficult*** describes the examination. The ***the*** tells us ‘which examination’. It is also possible to include information telling us ‘how many’: ***the two difficult university entrance examinations***. We refer to the information which precedes the head noun as the **Pre-Modifier** (*pre* because it is front of the Head noun, and **modifier** because the new information modifies or changes the Head noun). In other words:

the	difficult	university	entrance	examination
<i>which examination?</i>	<i>describes the examination</i>	<i>tells us what kind of examination</i>	<i>what kind of examination</i>	<i>head noun</i>

Consider these other examples of nominal groups with pre-modifying information. You will notice that in many cases the pre-modifying information is an adjective which serves to describe or classify the head noun. The nominal groups are in italics and the head noun is underlined.

*Standard deliveries* subject *the baby* to *spine-jerking dangling*.

*Content analysis* is designed to produce *an objective, measurable, verifiable account of the manifest content of the messages*.

As you can see from our last example, the nominal group can also include information which comes after the head. We refer to this information as the Post-Modifier. The information which follows the head noun can be a prepositional phrase, which starts with a preposition such as *in, at, of, for*. For example (head nouns are in bold, Post-Modifiers are underlined):

*the provision of goods and services*

*the difficult university entrance examination for this course*

or a clause such as

*the difficult university entrance examination held in September*

You may have noticed that the last two examples contain further nominal groups in the Post-Modifier: ***this course***, and ***September***. Needless to say, nominal groups can be long and complex.

## TASK 1 IDENTIFYING THE HEAD OF A NOMINAL GROUP

The Head noun in a nominal group tells us what the nominal group is about.

Underline the Head noun in each nominal group.

<b>Example</b>	communication industry <u>shares</u>
<b>Identify the Head noun:</b>	<p>1. modern technology</p> <p>2. many good jobs</p> <p>3. many good jobs for society</p> <p>4. the social benefits</p> <p>5. the social benefits of modern technology</p> <p>6. many negative side effects on the environment.</p> <p>7. environmental destruction caused by new technology (NB <i>caused by new technology</i> is a clause acting as Post-Modifier in the nominal group).</p>



## NOMINAL GROUPS AND ACADEMIC WRITING

In academic texts, the nominal groups are often necessarily complex containing Pre-Modifying elements as well as Post-Modifying. The nominal group structure is very useful because it is **elastic**: it can expand to specify and qualify information around the Head noun. It allows the writer to build up technicality, and its elasticity means information can be condensed into the nominal group rather than put into a separate clause. Complex nominal groups are a significant feature of academic writing, and the ability to construct complex nominal groups is intrinsic to becoming a sophisticated writer at university. However, if you find your meaning is not clear, it is best to ‘unpack’ some of the information from your nominal group and put it into a separate clause.

### TASK 2 EXPANDING THE NOMINAL GROUP: ADDING INFORMATION

Expand the nominal groups in the left column on the next page by including the information in italics in the right column. You may need to make minor changes. For example:

*The Japanese Government has a responsibility*

This sentence can be condensed into a nominal group:

*The responsibility of the Japanese Government.*

Note: by including the information in the right column into the nominal group you will no longer have a sentence. However, when writing you can see that by expanding the nominal group to include more information, you are then able to link the expanded nominal group to another idea. Always make sure that your meaning remains clear, and if it isn’t, it is best to ‘unpack’ some of the information in the nominal group and include another clause.

If you have trouble working out where a nominal group starts and ends, try shifting it around in the sentence: for example, *The social benefits of modern technology include the increased provision of goods, services and employment*. Is *services and employment* part of the nominal group containing *the increased provision of goods*? Yes, because we can change the sentence to read: *The increased provision of goods, services and employment is one of the social benefits of modern technology*.

#### Example:

1. These practices are **coded**

**Suggested answer:** *These coded practices*

2. The language has **historical divisions**

**Suggested answer:**

3. A democracy has as **part of its central theme** the rights of the individual

**Suggested answer:**

4. The culture is **feudal**

**Suggested answer:**

5. Audiences are **older**

**Suggested answer:**



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6. A revolution

has an **administrative leader**

**Suggested answer:**

7. The organisation of the October Revolution

was by **Lenin**

**Suggested answer:**

8. In the later consolidating period

**Lenin** had a **role**

**Suggested answer:**

9. new policies

**the administration**

**Suggested answer:**

10. realistic solutions to the people's problems

**the provision**

**Suggested answer:**

## THE NOMINAL GROUP AND RELATIVE CLAUSES

We have already mentioned that the nominal group can expand to contain information in prepositional phrases or even clauses containing further nominal groups. One type of clause common in nominal groups is a relative clause. A relative clause is a dependent clause (which means it must be joined to an independent clause): it is introduced by a relative pronoun such as **who**, **whose**, **that** or **which**. Relative clauses can also be introduced by words such as **when**, **where**, **why**. The function of relative clauses is to modify or describe a noun or pronoun in the independent clause (Oshima and Hogue, 1991, p. 208).

Here are some examples of relative clauses. The relative clause in each sentence is in bold:

*The waterfront workers **who were on strike** blocked the entrance to the dock. (only the waterfront workers who were on strike blocked the entrance)*

*Library books **which are overdue** will incur a fine.*

*The exam **that caused the most anxiety** was statistics.*

Notice that there are no commas in these sentences. This is because the relative clause is part of the nominal group: it serves to define and identify it. This type of relative clause is called a **defining relative clause**. The other type of relative clause is a **non-defining relative clause**. Non-defining relative clauses provide additional information about the nominal group, but these types of relative clauses aren't part of the nominal group. Below are some examples of non-defining relative clauses:

*The waterfront workers, **who were on strike**, blocked the entrance to the dock. (all the workers were on strike, and they all blocked the entrance)*

*Your library books, **which are overdue**, should be returned immediately.*

*The statistics exam, **which I no doubt will fail**, is finally over.*

**Defining relative clauses** are a useful way of condensing information and avoiding unnecessary repetition in your writing. For example, the repetition in the following sentences could be avoided by creating a defining relative clause.

*Some of the waterfront workers were on strike. Some of the waterfront workers blocked the entrance to the dock.*

*The waterfront workers **who were on strike** blocked the entrance to the dock.*



### TASK 3 EXPANDING THE NOMINAL GROUP USING RELATIVE CLAUSES

Expand the nominal groups in the following sentences by introducing a defining relative clause. You will need to introduce a relative pronoun (*who*, *which*, *that* etc) in order to join the sentences.

For example:

*The earthquake hit Newcastle in 1989*

*It caused widespread destruction*

*The earthquake which hit Newcastle in 1989 caused widespread destruction.*

1. Emergency workers rushed to the city. They did not realise the extent of the damage.

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2. Many inner city buildings were extensively damaged. These buildings have been rebuilt.

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3. A fund was established. It helped to pay for building works.

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### TASK 4 NOMINAL GROUPS: WHERE DO THEY START AND WHERE DO THEY FINISH?

Underline the nominal groups in Texts A and B. Keep in mind that the post modifying information in a nominal group (what comes after the head noun) can contain prepositional phrases as well as clauses, which in turn can contain further nominal groups.

#### Text A

People benefit from modern technology because it has improved our standard of living. Modern technology provides many good jobs and services for society, but it also damages the environment and causes environmental pollution. We know that modern technology damages the environment and causes pollution, so why do we still use it? Because we just can't live without it. Scientists are trying to reduce pollution and control the problems it causes, and if they don't, our environment will be destroyed. Modern technology is surely necessary and important, but how can we use it without causing negative effects?

#### Text B

The social benefits of modern technology include the increased provision of goods, services and employment. While this technology has many negative side-effects on the environment, particularly in regards to pollution, modern society is dependent on the benefits that this technology provides. In recent years, increasing public awareness of the extent of environmental destruction as a result of this technology has spurred scientific investigation into technologies which provide a more sustainable outcome for the environment. In this sense, modern society may continue to sustain itself and the environment through more sophisticated technology.



## KEY: NOUNS AND THEIR STRUCTURE

### 1 IDENTIFYING THE HEAD OF A NOMINAL GROUP

1. modern technology
2. many good jobs
3. many good jobs for society
4. the social benefits
5. the social benefits of modern technology
6. many negative side effects on the environment
7. environment destruction caused by new technology.

### 2 EXPANDING THE NOMINAL GROUP: ADDING INFORMATION IN FRONT OF THE HEAD NOUN

Suggested answers:

1. These *coded* practices
2. The *historical divisions* of the language
3. *Part of the central theme* of democracy
4. The *feudal* culture
5. *Older* audiences
6. The *administrative leader of a* revolution
7. *Lenin's organisation* of the October Revolution
8. *Lenin's role* in the later consolidating period
9. *The administration's new policies*
10. *The provision of realistic solutions to the people's problems.*

### 3 EXPANDING THE NOMINAL GROUP USING RELATIVE CLAUSES

1. Emergency workers **who rushed to the city** did not realise the extent of the damage.
2. Many inner city buildings which were extensively **damaged** have been rebuilt.
3. A fund **which helped to pay for building works** was established

### 4 NOMINAL GROUPS: WHERE DO THEY START AND WHERE DO THEY FINISH?

#### Text A

People benefit from modern technology because it has improved our standard of living. Modern technology provides many good jobs and services for society, but it also damages the environment and causes environmental pollution. We know that modern technology damages the environment and causes pollution, so why do we still use it? Because we just can't live without it. Scientists are trying to reduce pollution and control the problems it causes, and if they don't, our environment will be destroyed. Modern technology is surely necessary and important, but how can we use it without causing negative effects?



### Text B

The social benefits of modern technology include the increased provision of goods, services and employment. While this technology has many negative side-effects on the environment, particularly in regards to pollution, modern society is dependent on the benefits that this technology provides. In recent years, increasing public awareness of the extent of environmental destruction as a result of this technology has spurred scientific investigation into technologies which provide a more sustainable outcome for the environment. In this sense, modern society may continue to sustain itself and the environment through more sophisticated technology.

### REFERENCES

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