To write well, you need to understand how to form sentences. Parts of speech are the building blocks of sentences. Parts of speech are combined to form phrases. Phrases are in turn combined to form clauses, which are combined to form sentences. This handout will orient you to the different parts of speech.

Note: For this handout we have chosen to follow The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language since it is the most comprehensive and up-to-date source available. Some of the vocabulary and terms may be different than those you were taught previously.

Categorizing Parts of Speech

Linguists create different categories for parts of speech depending on their grammatical theories. We have divided this handout into two sections. The first covers traditional parts of speech (i.e., the ones you are probably familiar with). The second covers additional categories that you may have not considered.

Traditional Parts of Speech

Verbs

Verbs express actions or states of being. They are often the most important part of a clause.

Verbs: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Note: For more information on verbs, please see our handout on this topic.

Nouns

Nouns represent persons, places, things, or ideas. They usually function as subjects or objects in a clause.

Nouns: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Note: For more information on nouns, please see our handout on this topic.

Pronouns

Pronouns take the place of nouns. Like nouns, pronouns function as subjects or objects.

Pronoun: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Note: For more information on pronouns, please see our handout on this topic.
Adjectives
Adjectives modify (i.e., provide more information about) nouns. This category traditionally includes articles like “the” and “an” as well.

Adjective: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.
Articles: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Note: For more information on articles, please see our handout on this topic.

Adverbs
Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.

Adverb: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Prepositions
Prepositions link nouns or pronouns to other parts of the sentence.

Prepositions: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Note: For more information on prepositions, please see our handout on this topic.

Conjunctions
Conjunctions link words, phrases, and clauses together.

Conjunction: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Note: For more information on conjunctions, please see our handout on this topic.

Interjections
Interjections are words or short phrases that express emotion or opinion.

Example: Ah! We saw a giant monkey quickly climb to the top of the building and jump off.

Other Categories
Some linguists and grammarians have different ways of dividing the parts of speech. These three categories are particularly helpful.

Determinatives
Determinatives provide information about a noun’s quantity or definiteness. Determinatives include many words that are traditionally categorized as adjectives or pronouns.

Articles: The cat ate a rat.
Demonstratives: That cat ate this rat.
Interrogatives: Which cat ate the rat?
Numbers: One cat ate two rats.
Quantifiers: Many cats eat some rats. Few cats eat no rats.
Other: Each cat ate both rats. Neither cat ate every rat.
Just as nouns function as subjects and objects, determinatives function as determiners. In other words, a determinative is a part of speech, and determiner is a role. The similarity of the names can cause confusion, but the important thing to remember is that other parts of speech can function as determiners too, like noun phrases and preposition phrases.

**Possessive Noun Phrase:** Sally’s cat ate my brother’s rat.
**Preposition Phrase:** Over ten thousand cats eat rats.

*Note:* For more information on phrases, please see our handout on this topic.

### Coordinators

Coordinators join equal parts of speech, phrases, and clauses. The most common coordinators are “and,” “but,” “or,” and “nor,” which are traditionally categorized as coordinating conjunctions.

- **Words:** cat and rat
- **Phrases:** over the hills or through the woods
- **Clauses:** The cat ate the rat, but the dog ate the cat.

### Subordinators

Whereas coordinators join elements that are equal, subordinators indicate that a clause is subordinate to or dependent on another part. Traditional grammarians usually place many conjunctive adverbs and prepositions into the category of subordinator, but others reserve the role for a few words, such as “that,” “for,” “to,” whether, and “if.”

- **Example:** They told me that I shouldn’t go in there.
- **Example:** I can’t tell whether they made it.
- **Example:** She made preparations for both of them to arrive next Monday.

### References

