

What, How and Why - Essentials for tutors - Chapter One

Words and their Work 1 - the jobs done by individual words. These basic jobs done by words have to be understood before our students can look at the way they work together when they speak and write.

Nouns label things, give them an identity or show what sort of thing they are, individual things, groups of things, particular things or things that cannot be detected with our senses but with our understanding: **dogs, teams, Auckland** and **excitement**.

Adjectives qualify nouns: **black** ice cream, **friendly** teachers, **clever** liars. The word **qualify** requires careful explanation. In practical terms it means to add information about something, the colour of the ice cream, etc.

Verbs – the most important words in a sentence

You must make clear, that without a verb there is no sentence, that without a verb, nothing is said because, grammatically speaking, nothing has happened. All you will have done is draw attention to something without saying anything about it.

You may mention your favourite musician, school mate, neighbour or even politician, but until you have used a verb, you have said nothing. “Elvis Presley,” you shout. “What about Elvis Presley?” I reply. Until someone has said something such as, “Elvis **lives**,” we have said nothing.

Adverbs qualify verbs and adjectives. They can tell us more about an action: how do we whisper? We whisper **loudly**. They can also tell us more about a quality of something: how can you notice the ice cream shop? It’s **brightly** coloured.

Pronouns stand in for nouns. Each time we meet a name we check it subconsciously. If it is one that we have only just checked, the flow of information is interrupted while we check it again. This is a nuisance so we use pronouns to refer to identities that we have already met.

Pippa walked up to Billy. **She** smiled and gave **him** her handbag. **He** could see that **it** was **hers**. This is much easier than: Pippa walked up to Billy. Pippa smiled and gave Billy her handbag. Billy could see that the handbag was Pippa’s handbag.

Prepositions simply link nouns, or nouns and verbs, to show how they fit together: We slip **out** of the classroom **to** the seat **in** the park.

Conjunctions join words **and** groups of words. Sometimes they are simply put side by side - rock **and** roll. Sometimes more is indicated: **but** I don’t care, **so** I will stay indoors, **then** it poured, **because** it’s raining.

Articles make clear the identity of things. **The** girl who threw ice cream at the teacher. (Not any girl. **The** is the **definite** article.) **Some** girls (We don’t know which ones because **some** is an **indefinite** article) wished they had thrown ice cream at the teacher and **a** girl near the back of the class had just unwrapped a choc-ice. (**a** girl, one of the other girls in the class – **a** and **an** are indefinite articles)

And finally

Exclamations, interjections – *Look out!* - and swear words are used in immediate, automatic reactions to things. I encouraged sixth-formers to restrain themselves by saying, “Oh ffffff....fertiliser!”