

The Serbian Nominative Case: Endings and Usage

The nominative endings for the three possible classes of Serbian nouns are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The nominative case of Serbian nouns

	Class I (masculine: ending in a consonant) 'window'	Class I (neuter: ending in -o or -e) 'village'	Class II (feminine: ending in -a) 'woman'	Class III (feminine: ending in a consonant) 'love'
SINGULAR				
Nominative	prozor Jovan (John)	selo	žena	ljubav
PLURAL	'windows'	'villages'	'women'	'loves'
Nominative	prozor- i	sel- a	žen- e	ljubav- i

Notice that nominative feminine singular nouns (žena 'woman') have the same **-a** ending as the nominative neuter plural nouns (sela 'villages'). It's confusing, but you have to learn it. Can't sidestep the grammar!

How can you tell which noun belongs to which declension class? Follow these basic rules for classifying nouns in declension classes:

- i) If the noun ends in a **consonant**, most probably it's a **Class I masculine noun** (e.g. prozor 'window').
- ii) If the noun ends in vowels **-o**, or **-e** in singular nominative case, it's a **Class I neuter noun** (e.g. sel-o 'village', polj-e 'field'). However, there are some male proper names that end in these vowels, and are classified as **Class I masculine noun** (e.g. Marko, Rade), not neuter nouns. So, semantics wins!

Neuter nouns that denote young persons or animals have the regular nominative ending in **-o** or **-e**, but **their plural nominative ending** is either **-i**, just like Class I masculine nouns, or **-ad**. With the **-ad** ending, these nouns behave like collective nouns. Some examples:

Table 2: Nominative endings of neuter nouns denoting young persons or animals

nominative singular	momče 'young lad'	unuče 'grandchild'	pile 'chick'	tele 'calf'
nominative plural -i:	momčići 'young lads'	unučići 'grandchildren'	pilići 'chicks'	telićii 'calves'
nominative plural -ad:	momčad 'young lads'	unučad 'grandchildren'	pilad 'chicks'	telad 'calves'

- iii) If the noun ends in **-a** in singular nominative case, it's a **Class II noun**, and these nouns are feminine. There is a small group of male-denoting nouns that also end in **-a**, (e.g. sudija 'judge', Steva – male name, gazda 'master, landlord', gospoda 'gentlemen'). But grammatically, these nouns act as feminine. So, forget about their semantics.
- iv) The **Class III nouns** are all feminine and end in a **consonant**, just like Class I nouns. How then to distinguish Class I masculine nouns from Class III feminine nouns? **Class III nouns typically denote abstract objects** (e. g. ljubav 'love', smrt 'death', bolest 'illness', mladost 'youth').

This class of nouns is not productive, i.e. when a new noun that ends in a consonant is imported into the language, it goes into Class I (masculine nouns), not into Class III (feminine nouns). For example, the loan noun **stres** (from the English 'stress') is classified as a Class I masculine noun.

When to use the nominative case in sentences?

- **The nominative case is typically used as the subject of a sentence.** As a consequence, the nominative case can never appear after the preposition, unlike other cases.
Notice that in the examples below, subjects can occur anywhere in the sentence, not only in the initial position. [Word order](#) is pretty free. At least, something easy!

Table 3: Some examples of nominative nouns as subjects

	Serbian	English
1.	Prozor je čist.	The window is clean.
2.	Jovan je došao iz Beograda.	John came from Belgrade.
3.	Ova žena dugo spava.	This woman sleeps a lot.
4.	Ja vidim moje selo .	I see my village.
5.	Čist je prozor .	(Clean is the window. = same as 1.)
6.	Došao je iz Beograda Jovan .	(came from Belgrade John = same meaning as in 2.)

Nominative case is also used in copular or predicative sentences (sentences that use verb **biti** 'to be' as the main verb). Some examples:

Table 4: Some examples of nominative nouns in predicative sentences

Serbian	English
Milan je lekar .	Milan is a doctor.
Milan je bio dobar lekar .	Milan was a good doctor.
Ovo je Beograd .	This is Belgrade.
One su glumice .	They are actresses.
Ja sam Larisa .	I am Larisa.
Ja se zovem Larisa .	I'm called Larisa (my name is Larisa)

Notice that in the above sentences, which are also called '**identificational**' constructions, both the subject (the noun before the conjugated verb *biti* 'to be') and the post-copular noun (shown in red) have nominative case.

Unlike other cases that can occur as both objects of verbs and prepositions, nominative case cannot occur as the object of a preposition. (Note: the [locative case](#) is the only case that occurs only with prepositions.)

To ask questions about the nominative case (subject), such as 'Who/What is that?' we use the following **interrogative pronouns in the nominative case**:

Ko 'who' **Šta** 'what'

Table 5: Some examples of questions that ask about the subject

Serbian	English
Question: Ko je došao?	<u>Who</u> came?
Answer: Jovan je došao.	<u>John</u> came.
Question: Ko je to?	<u>Who</u> is that?

Answer: To je profesor .	<u>That is a professor.</u>
Quesiton: Šta je ovo?	<u>What is this?</u>
Answer: Ovo je prozor.	<u>This is a window.</u>
Quesiton: Kako se zove ovo ?	How do you call <u>this</u> ?
Answer: Ovo se zove knjiga .	<u>This is called a book.</u>
Quesiton: Kako se kaže ' book '?	How do you say 'book'?
Answer: Book se kaže ' knjiga '.	<u>Book is called 'knjiga'.</u>

The last two questions can be very useful to find out how names of the objects or persons are called in Serbian. So, don't be shy and keep asking your teacher or a native speaker for the names of the objects, so you can enrich your vocabulary, and also learn the nominative case.

And now some exercises! If you get stuck or are not sure you got it right, please [email](#) me for help.

Exercise 1 – Put the nouns below in the appropriate declension class

Using the nouns below insert them in the appropriate cell of Table 5. An example is provided in the first row of the table.

Miodrag (proper name)	kafa 'coffee'	zemlja 'earth, soil'
Dragica (proper name)	šećer 'sugar'	mesec 'moon'
Novi Sad (name of the city in Serbia)	jare 'kid –young goat'	zvezda 'star'
Dalas 'Dallas'	koza 'goat'	ogledalo 'mirror'
Florida	voz 'train'	čaša 'glass'
Italija 'Italy'	autobus 'bus'	pasulj 'beans'
Florida	bol 'pain'	veče 'evening'
vreme 'time, weather'	tuga 'sadness'	zora 'dawn'
život 'life'	žalost 'sorrow'	žito 'wheat'
korito 'trough'	bure 'barrel'	pivo 'beer'
vozač 'driver'	zgrada 'building'	zima 'winter'

Table 6: Classify the above nouns in the appropriate declension classes

Class I (masculine nouns)	Class I (neuter nouns)	Class II (feminine nouns and some masculine nouns)	Class III (feminine nouns)
nož	pero	trava	radost

Exercise 2 – Translate the following sentences

For this exercise you need to know both the [present tense](#) and [past tense](#). The **boldface nouns require the nominative case**. If you don't have a bi-directional Serbian-English-Serbian dictionary, you may go to the website: <http://www.krstarica.com/dictionary/> to get the words you need for this exercise. Note that for nouns, a dictionary will give you the nominative case forms.

1.	This is a vase.
2.	Branko is a teacher.
3.	This is called a pear.
4.	This is called an apple.
5.	That was my brother.
6.	What is that?
7.	They are accountants.
8.	What is Zorica?
9.	She is a nurse.