

## THE SERBIAN NOUN DECLENSION (DEKLINACIJA IMENICA)

Q: What is a noun declension?

A: It's how a noun changes ('declines') its form depending on its position in a sentence, i.e., whether it's a subject, a direct object, an object of a preposition. This different positioning of a noun in a sentence is called case (or 'padež').

Nouns (as well as pronouns and adjectives) in Serbian have seven cases: [nominative](#), [accusative](#), [genitive](#), [dative](#), [locative](#), [instrumental](#) and [vocative](#), in both singular and plural.

A full declensional paradigm for nouns is shown in Table 2 below. [Adjectives](#) and [pronouns](#) have similar (yet slightly different) endings and are dealt separately.

But before I suffocate you with further grammar lingo, let me give you a practical example of a noun declension. For fun, I'll decline my name: 'Larisa'.

**Table 1: Declension of proper name 'Larisa' (feminine noun)**

Larisa je dobra nastavnica.	Larisa is a good teacher. (Larisa = subject; Larisa = nominative case)
Vidim Larisu.	I see Larisa. (Larisu = 'direct' object; Larisu = accusative case)
On daje knjigu Larisi.	He is giving a book to Larisa. (Larisi = 'indirect' object; Larisi = dative case)
Idem sa Larisom.	I am going with Larisa. (Larisom = object of preposition 'sa'; Larisom = instrumental case)
Idem kod Larise.	I'm going to Larisa's (house). (Larise = object of preposition 'kod'; Larise = genitive case)

As you can see, Larisa's name keeps changing its phonological shape (the ending) depending on what function it has in a sentence (subject, direct object, indirect object, object of preposition).

Table 2 below shows declension patterns for all four classes of nouns (masculine, feminine, neuter, singular, plural). This table should be always in front of you when you compose a sentence, until you memorize (yes, you will) all the endings.

To make sense out of this table, you should also read descriptions of usage of each case, given in separate files.

**Table 2: Suffixes (or endings) for Serbian Noun Declensions**

	<b>Class I</b> (masculine: ending in a consonant in nominative) 'window'	<b>Class I</b> (neuter: ending in <b>-o</b> or <b>-e</b> in nominative) 'village'	<b>Class II</b> (feminine: ending in <b>-a</b> in nominative) 'woman'	<b>Class III</b> (feminine: ending in a consonant in nominative) 'love'
<b>SINGULAR</b>				
<b>Nominative</b>	prozor	selo	žena	ljubav
<b>Accusative</b>	prozor	selo	žen- <b>u</b>	ljubav
<b>Genitive</b>	prozor- <b>a</b>	sel- <b>a</b>	žen- <b>e</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>
<b>Dative/Locative</b>	prozor- <b>u</b>	sel- <b>u</b>	žen- <b>i</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>
<b>Instrumental</b>	prozor- <b>om</b>	sel- <b>om</b>	žen- <b>om</b>	ljubav- <b>i (or-ju)</b>
<b>Vocative</b>	prozor- <b>e</b>	selo	žen- <b>o</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>
<b>PLURAL</b>	'windows'	'villages'	'women'	'loves'
<b>Nominative</b>	prozor- <b>i</b>	sel- <b>a</b>	žen- <b>e</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>
<b>Accusative</b>	prozor- <b>e</b>	sel- <b>a</b>	žen- <b>e</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>
<b>Genitive</b>	prozor- <b>a</b>	sel- <b>a</b>	žen- <b>a</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>
<b>Dative/Locative</b>	prozor- <b>ima</b>	sel- <b>ima</b>	žen- <b>ama</b>	ljubav- <b>ima</b>
<b>Instrumental</b>	prozor- <b>ima</b>	sel- <b>ima</b>	žen- <b>ama</b>	ljubav- <b>ima</b>
<b>Vocative</b>	prozor- <b>i</b>	sel- <b>a</b>	žen- <b>e</b>	ljubav- <b>i</b>

As you can see, there are basically four declension classes, although I lumped neuter nouns in Class I, as many traditional grammars do. Each noun belongs to one of these classes depending on its phonological form of the stem. For example, a noun such as 'prozor' (window) has a masculine gender, 'ljubav' (love) has a feminine gender, and 'selo' has a neuter gender. Of course, here we're talking about grammatical gender and not semantic gender (maleness/femaleness), as is the case in English.

#### How can you tell which noun belongs to which declension class?

Follow these basic rules for classifying nouns in declension classes:

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

For this class of nouns, most cases end in **-i**, so it's easy to memorize.

If this is overwhelming, don't panic! Try to tackle each case separately and learn when to use it. You can do that by browsing through individual noun-case pages and doing exercises given there.

**Table 3: Some examples of noun declensions used in sentences:**

Serbian	English	Grammatical function of the noun in a sentence and its case
<b>Prozor</b> je mali.	The <u>window</u> is small.	Prozor = subject (nominative)
<b>Selo</b> je lepo.	The <u>village</u> is nice.	Selo = subject (nominative)
<b>Žena</b> je došla.	The <u>woman</u> came.	Žena = subject (nominative)
<b>Ljubav</b> je varljiva.	<u>Love</u> is tricky.	Ljubav = subject (nominative)
Razbila sam <b>prozor</b> .	I broke <u>the window</u> .	Prozor = direct object (accusative)
Videla sam to <b>selo</b> .	I saw <u>that village</u> .	Selo = direct object (accusative e)
Srela sam tu <b>ženu</b> .	I met <u>that woman</u> .	Ženu = direct object (accusative)
Srela sam tu <b>ženu</b> .	Srela sam tu ženu.	Ženu = direct object (accusative)
Stidim se <b>majke</b> .*	I am ashamed <u>of (my) mother</u> .	Majke = direct object (genitive)
Plašim se <b>mraka</b> .*	I am afraid of darkness.	Mraka = direct object (genitive)
Razglednice <b>Beograda</b> su lepe.	The postcards <u>of Belgrade</u> are pretty.	Beograda = direct object of the noun 'razglednice' (genitive)
Daj bombone <b>dečaku</b> .	Give the candy <u>to the boy</u> .	Dečaku = indirect object (dative)
Zoran se divi <b>Marici</b> .	Zoran admires <u>Marica</u> .	Marici = indirect object (dative)
Jovan je mahao <b>rukom</b> .	Jovan waved <u>his hand</u> .	Rukom = direct object (instrumental)
Milan upravlja <b>firmom</b> .	Milan is managing <u>the company</u> .	Firmom = direct object (instrumental)
Šetamo <b>sa turistima</b> .	We are strolling <u>with tourists</u> .	Turistima prepositional object (instrumental)
Živimo <b>u gradu</b> .	We live <u>in the city</u> .	Gradu = prepositional object (locative)
Bio sam <b>u školi</b> .	I was <u>in school</u> .	Školi = prepositional object (locative)
Zoran se divi <b>Marici</b> .	Zoran admires <u>Marica</u> .	Marici = indirect object (dative)
Pevaj, <b>devojčice</b> .	Sing, (you) girl!	Devojčice = for addressing people (vocative case)

\*There is a group of 'reflexive' verbs (verbs that always occur with the reflexive pronoun **se**) that take the **genitive case**, not the accusative case. For details, read about the [usage of genitive case](#).