

## 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 a 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. (Larisa = '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, my 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 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</b> (or- <b>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 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!
- 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.

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
Prozor je mali.	The <u>window</u> is small.	Prozor = subject (nominative)
Selo je lepo.	The <u>village</u> is nice.	Selo = subject (nominative)
Žena je došla.	The <u>woman</u> came.	Žena = subject (nominative)
Ljubav 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 <u>tu ženu</u> .	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](#).