Syllable structure

A syllable consists of an onset (initial consonant) followed by a rhyme. The rhyme is composed of a nucleus (vowel) and coda (final consonant). Sometimes there may be more than one consonant in the onset or the coda. A syllable which lacks a coda is called an open syllable; a syllable which has a coda is a closed syllable.

Languages vary in the range of syllable structures which they permit. English is quite permissive. Other languages, such as Hawaiian, are much more restrictive. For example, we saw the following examples of English words adopted into Hawaiian:

velvet [welaweka]
market [makeke]

The English sound [t] changes to [k], since Hawaiian has no [t]. Extra vowels are inserted to ensure that Hawaiian's prohibition on closed syllables is not violated.

Parts of speech

Tests for adjectives, adverbs and determiners are pretty straightforward:

Adjectives:
These can be used to modify a noun, typically by placing the adjective between a determiner and the noun. E.g. “the short man,” “a strange occurrence.”

Adverbs:
These can appear in all sorts of positions. You can identify them in virtue of the facts that they (i) modify either a verb or an adjective, and (ii) usually (but not always) end in “ly”. E.g. “the really nice man,” “John ran quickly,” “John plays the violin well,” “Suddenly, John stood up and left the room.”

Determiners:
These typically appear immediately before a noun, or before an adjective modifying a noun. E.g. “the man,” “a nice man,” “some men,” “every man,” “this man.”

1 Taken from Spencer, A. 1996, Phonology, Blackwell, p. 79.
None of the above really differs from what traditional grammar has to say about adjectives, adverbs and determiners. However, our approach to nouns and verbs is quite different from the traditional approach. Instead of trying to define nouns and verbs in terms of meaning (e.g. saying that a noun refers to a “person, place or thing”), we will be using more precise syntactic tests for nounhood and verbhood.

The basic principle is very simple. Nouns have some properties that verbs don’t, and verbs have some properties that nouns don’t. For example, verbs (in English) have tense, whereas nouns don’t have tense. English nouns have number (singular/plural), whereas verbs do not.\textsuperscript{2}

No one property will reliably identify all nouns or verbs; you need to look at two or three to be sure in your conclusion. For example, not all English nouns can be pluralized (“* soups”), and not all English verbs show obvious tense distinctions (e.g. “used” in “I used to do that” cannot be used in the present or future tenses).

The following lists give some arbitrarily selected properties of nouns and verbs which you can use to identify a word as one of these two categories. These are in no way complete or definitive lists, but they should be sufficient for our purposes.

\textit{Nouns:}

Singular/plural.

Often (but not always) preceded by a determiner.

Modifiable by adjectives.

\textit{Verbs:}

Tense (past, present, future).

Modifiable by adverbs.

Can be replaced by shorthand forms like \textit{do/did}, e.g. “John \textit{likes} Mary and Bill \textit{does} (= likes Mary) too.”

\textsuperscript{2} This is confused slightly by the fact that English verbs do \textit{agree in number} with the subject of a sentence. But this works quite differently from number on nouns. Verbs add a “-s” ending in the present tense when the subject is singular, but of course the “-s” ending on nouns indicates plurality.