Parts of Speech Notes

Tests for adjectives, adverbs and determiners (= articles) 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 the
noun. E.g. “the man,” “a nice man,” “some men,” “ever man,” “this man.”

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 a bit
different from the traditional approach. Instead of trying to pick out these categories in
terms of meaning (e.g. by saying that a noun refers to a “person, place or thing”), we will
be using more precise syntactic tests.

The basic principle is very simple. Nouns have some properties that verbs don’t have,
and vice versa. For example, verbs (in English) have tense, whereas nouns don’t.
English nouns have number (singular/plural) whereas verbs don’t.¹

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

Nouns:
Singular/plural.
Often (but not always) preceded by a determiner.
Modifiable by adjectives.

Verbs:
Tense (past, present, future)
Modifiable by adverbs.
Can often be replaced by shorthand forms like do/did, e.g. “I like Mary and Bill does (= like
Mary) too.”

¹ This is confused slightly by the fact that English verbs do 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.