A Primer to Sanskrit Grammar

Part 1 : shabda-s and vibhakti-s[1]

There are three basic parts of speech in sanskrit : shabda (nouns/ pronouns/ adjectives/ participles), dhAtu(verbs), and avyaya (indeclinables: prepositions, conjunctions,adverbs, exclamations etc.)

Here we shall discuss declensions of nouns. The form of a noun used in a sentence dependes on two things : Its vachana (number: this is singular,dual or plural) and its vibhakti (case). The vibhakti to be used is governed by the role the noun plays in the sentence , e.g. subject,object, instrument of action etc. Here is a brief explanation of vibhaktis along with an example :

Explanation of Sanskrit Vibhaktis :

There are eight possible vibhaktis of a word. Of these, six relate to an action and hence are also "kAraks." The other two (shhashhThi : Possesive and sambodhanaM : denominative) do not necessarily associate with an action. The following table lists the vibhaktis and their usual meanings. There are special rules and exceptions which need to be learnt elsewhere.

प्रथमा Nominative (performer/subject)
द्वितीया Accusative (object)
तृतीया Instrumental (instrument)
चतुर्थी Dative (for whom the action is performed)
पंचमी Ablative (from where the action is performed)
षष्ठी Possesive (denotes possesion)
सप्तमी Locative (location of the action)
सम्बोधनम् Denominative (used to address someone)

The verse below from shriiraamarakshaa is often used as an aid to explain the vibhaktis. Each line of the verse contains a form of the word राम in a different vibhakti and in the singular number :

In shloka format:

रामो राजमणिः सदा विजयते रामं रमेशं भजे
रामेणाभिहता निशाचरचमू रामाय तस्मै नमः ।
रामान्नास्ति परायणं परतरं रामस्य दासोऽस्म्यहं
रामे चित्तलयः सदा भवतु मे भो राम ! मामुद्धर ॥

After breaking the various sandhis it becomes:

रामः राजमणिः सदा विजयते
रामं रमेशम् भजे
रामेण अभिहता निशाचरचमूः
रामाय तस्मै नमः
रामात् नास्ति परायणम् परतरम्
रामस्य दासः अस्मि अहम्
रामे चित्तलयः सदा भवतु मे
भो राम ! माम् उद्धर

Explanation (line by line):

rAma (nominative, subject) , the gem among kings is always victorious
I worship rAma (accusative,object) the husband of ramA
The army of demons was slain by rAma (Instrumental, instrument of action)
A salute for that rAma (Dative : one for whom the action is done)
There is no better destination from rAma (Ablative)
I am a servant of rAma (Possesive)
May my mind always rest in rAma (Locative)
O rAmA (Denominative), please uplift me !

As seen above, the vibhakti to be used depends on the role the noun (or adjective or participle) plays in the sentence. In order to come up with the correct final declension, you need to know the vibhakti, the number, the gender and the ending syllable.

For example all masculine words ending in "a") will have identical forms. hence rAma, deva, sUrya etc. have identical declentions, shashin.h, medhAvin.h etc. have identical declensions; jala, pAnIya, gR^iha, vana etc. have identical declensions and so on. Of course, there are variations in the final forms caused by the rules of sandhi. This will be noted as needed.

Having understood the above, if one has access to declensions of representative words of each class (where a class is deternined by gender and ending syllable), one can easily derive the form one needs.

For example, if you want to say "The man lives in the house", you may proceed as follows;

The subject is man : मनुष्य . Here we would need the nominative singular of the word मनुष्य . The word is masculine and ends in the syllable अ Hence it would be declined like देव . The nominative singular of deva is देवः hence the form of manushhya to be used would be मनुष्यः . Similarly, gR^iha is a

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word for house and it has a neuter gender. Here we would refer to forms of the word वन and the appropriate form to use would be गृहे .
Thus the sentence in sanskrit would be :
मनुष्यः गृहे वसति
Of course, this also requires knowledge about the verb vasa and its declensions, which will be discussed elsewhere. Also, there are always some special exceptions which need to be learned elsewhere.
As an excercise the reader can now again go through forms of the word deva and confirm that the correct forms of the word rAma have been used in the verses written above.

Please see the accompanying document, Nouns and Verbs, file noun.itx/.ps which has several words and their different forms, which are called paradigms.