

Entity instances have **identifiers**, which are attributes that name, or identify, entity instances. For example, EMPLOYEE instances could be identified by SocialSecurityNumber, EmployeeNumber, or EmployeeName. EMPLOYEE instances are not likely to be identified by attributes like Salary or DateOfHire because normally these attributes are not used in a naming role. Similarly CUSTOMERs could be identified by CustomerNumber or CustomerName, and SALES-ORDERs could be identified by OrderNumber.

The identifier of an entity instance consists of one or more of the entity's attributes. An identifier may be either **unique** or **nonunique**. If it is unique, its value will identify one, and only one, entity instance. If it is nonunique, the value will identify a set of instances. EmployeeNumber is most likely a unique identifier, while EmployeeName is most likely a nonunique identifier (there may be many John Smiths for example).

Identifiers that consist of two or more attributes are called **composite identifiers**. Examples are {AreaCode, LocationNumber}, {ProjectName, TaskName}, and {FirstName, LastName, PhoneExtension}.