

Countable and Uncountable Nouns

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Abstract: Countable and uncountable nouns are one of the most important topics in English grammar. This article gives examples, rules, specific cases in this area.

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Nouns are words that name a person, place, thing, or concept (e.g., history, transportation, water, honesty, Christianity, Islam). Proper nouns name a specific person (Kara Walker), place (New York City), or thing (the Internet) and begin with a capital letter. All other nouns are common nouns (an artist, a major metropolitan city, a computer network) and begin with a lowercase letter. Common nouns can be categorized as countable or uncountable; they can also be singular (a student) or plural (the students). A collective noun names a collection of people or things that are regarded as a unit (e.g., audience, family, team, jury, and committee) and is nearly always treated as singular (the audience is, the team competes, the family was—but the family members were). The possessive form of a noun usually indicates ownership and uses an apostrophe or an apostrophe and “-s” (a student’s presentation, the students’ presentations).

What do we mean when we speak of nouns as being countable or uncountable? Countable nouns name individual items that can add up; there can be one or more of them—they can be counted. A countable noun can have a number before it (one table, three students, ten dollars) and has a plural form. Countable nouns usually add “-s” or “-es/-ies” to indicate the plural (table, tables; student, students; dollar, dollars; dress, dresses; baby, babies). Use singular countable nouns after specific determiners or words that identify or qualify the noun, such as articles (a, an, the) as well as demonstrative adjectives (this, that) and indefinite adjectives like “another,” “each,” “either,” and “every” that modify a word used with a singular verb (a peach, an apple, the office, this moment, that girl, another reason, each building, either example, every experience). Use plural countable nouns after the definite article “the” and demonstrative adjectives (these, those) that modify a word used with a plural verb (the owners, these windows, those paintings).

There was one table assigned for three students from the class. (one table, three students, the definite article “the” indicates one class)

It cost ten dollars to attend the function. (ten dollars, the definite article “the” indicates one function)

Other things cannot be directly counted and have no plural form; they are considered collective rather than individual items. In many cases, this distinction is easy to understand. We all recognize that we can count items like tables, students, or dollars. We can easily imagine one or more of such items. And most of us recognize that it is not possible to count other things like water, dust, air, or ice cream. These things cannot easily be separated into individual items.

But many nouns are uncountable for less obvious reasons. Most concepts or abstract ideas like peace, happiness, wealth, and knowledge are uncountable. So are many activities such as swimming, eating, and skateboarding as well as some conditions such as confusion, frustration, satisfaction, and certainty. These nouns are considered uncountable because they are not easily identified as single things: the idea of happiness can consist of many different things and can be different for different people; or

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because they refer to general activities rather than specific instances: eating refers to the activity in general, not any particular example. The names of most disciplines are also uncountable, for example, sociology, medicine, and anthropology. Nouns ending in “-ism” are also usually uncountable, for example, feminism, optimism, and patriotism.

Some uncountable nouns like work, homework, money, and gossip are very confusing for learners of English because they seem to refer to particular items, yet they are treated as general activities. When we speak of work, we are not thinking of a particular job or activity—we include the idea of what anyone might do in any job that would be considered doing work. Jobs are countable items that are specific instances of the general idea of work.

In the same way, homework is not the particular assignment or assignments a student does. It is the general idea of students doing assignments. When a student says, "I have to do my homework," s/he may mean one assignment or several assignments or parts of one or more assignments, so the student knows what particular activities are involved, but they are referred to as part of a generalized activity, for example, “My homework can be something different every day.”

As you have perhaps noticed, individual activities like jobs and assignments, which are closely identified with uncountable nouns like work and homework, are countable. As such, it would be incorrect to say "I have lots of homeworks to do." However, it would be correct to say "I have lots of assignments."

Money and gossip are also interesting examples of uncountable nouns because, of course, lots of people love “to count their money” and “listen to the latest gossip.”

Money (as a general idea) is the root of all evil.

He earned enough money (as a general idea) to buy a new laptop, but needed to borrow fifty dollars (a particular item that can be counted) to pay his rent.

Gossip (as a general idea) ruined her reputation.

She would not listen to the gossip (as a general idea) because the negative statements (a particular item that can be counted) were untrue.

Use uncountable nouns after specific determiners as noted above, such as the definite article “the” and the singular demonstrative adjectives “this” and “that” (the advice, this equipment, that information); however, do not use uncountable nouns following a number, the indefinite articles “a” and “an,” plural demonstrative adjectives (these, those), or indefinite adjectives like “both,” “many,” or “several” that modify a word used with a plural verb.

COMMON UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

accuracy	fun	machinery	reliability
admiration	furniture	mail	research
advice	garbage	math	sadness
aggression	generosity	merchandise	safety

Also confusing for many students are the numerous English nouns that have both a countable and an uncountable sense. Depending on the context, these nouns sometimes refer to a particular thing and at other times to a general idea. In some cases, this is not difficult, for example: “Death (as a general idea) is inevitable.”/“She missed work because there was a death (as a particular thing) in her family.” However, many nouns are thought of as general more by custom than for any clear reason.

Other nouns that can be either countable or uncountable include substances that things can be made of, like paper or glass. When you write an essay on paper, it becomes a paper. Other nouns in this category are words like wood and cloth, which refer to the material that may be made of many different varieties of tree or fabric. Thus, the material of an elm, an oak, or a pine tree is all wood; linen, silk, and cotton are all made into cloth.

Countable: We visited four colleges on the tour. Uncountable: College is an important learning experience.

Countable: There were numerous diseases that were being treated. Uncountable: Disease is rampant throughout the region.

COMMON NOUNS THAT CAN BE BOTH COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE

abuse	drama	jail	reading
adulthood	duck	jealousy	religion
afternoon	education	language	revision

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