

Compound nouns rules in English

In English, to form compound names, two or more names are associated, which can be juxtaposed, joined or simply separated by a dash:

- a bookshop
- a bread knife
- a beach towel
- a horse-race
- the city-centre

There are also other constructions possible, but they are rarer: with a gerund (ing) + noun, a particle + noun, or a noun + particle:

- a checkout
- windsurfing

It's always the last element that bears the mark of the plural (with some exceptions). It is then necessary to add an -s to the last element:

- a bus driver
- the bus drivers
- a toothbrush
- two toothbrushes

There are a few exceptions:

- a sports car
- a savings account
- a clothes shop
- a customs officer

USE

It is always the last noun that is the most important. The one or those which precede it play the role of adjective: they describe the last word.

- a flower garden
- a garden flower

A compound noun is used when the relationship between the two nouns is recognized as constant. The meaning of the relationship between nouns is diverse: place, use, material, cause, etc...

- the town centre
- a stone bridge

Be careful! We use noun + of + noun, and not a compound noun, to talk about a quantity of something.

- a piece of cheese
- a slice of ham

- a box of matches
- a spoonful of honey
- a group of tourists

Be careful to distinguish the container and content:

- a glass of wine
- a wine glass
- a tea cup
- a cup of tea

Some compound nouns have a particle at the end:

- a take-off
- a close-up
- a passer-by
- a grown-up
- a breakdown
- a handout
- a breakthrough

The plural is formed by adding an -s to the particle:

- breakdowns
- grown-ups

The particle can sometimes be at the beginning of the compound noun (in these cases the plural is formed by adding -s to the last word):

- an outbreak
- an oucast
- an overdose
- an income

Compound nouns are widely used in newspaper headlines and technical language. They sometimes have more than two elements:

- An evening dress rental service