

# Countable and uncountable nouns in English

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There are two categories of nouns in English: countable nouns and uncountable nouns in English. They must be distinguished because their use is different.

## Countable nouns

Countable nouns refer to distinct elements, things that we can count. In front of a countable noun, we can use a number, the indefinite articles *a/an*, the defined article *the*, *some* (in the plural), or a possessive or demonstrative adjective. They can be used either in the singular or plural, usually with a final -s:

- a car → two cars
- an orange → three oranges
- one girl → two girls
- a friend → four friends

These names can be counted, so they are countable.

However, there are spelling irregularities as well as exceptions and invariable words (which do not change to the plural) - for more details see the [lesson on plurals](#).

- man → men
- woman → women
- baby → babies
- tooth → teeth
- child → children
- kiss → kisses
- knife → knives
- mouse → mice
- tomato → tomatoes
- sheep → sheep
- deer → deer
- aircraft → aircraft

## Uncountable nouns

The uncountable nouns represent global things, which cannot be counted. They may not be preceded by a number or a year. They require a verb in the singular. Often, uncountable nouns do not have a plural.

- I hate milk.

Milk cannot be counted, so it is an uncountable noun. You can't say: I hate ~~the~~ milk

The uncountable nouns are generally:

- Materials, substances or food too small or too fluid to be counted one by one (liquid, powder, gas): *coffee, flour, butter, blood, gold, cheese, bread, honey, air, milk, rice, sugar, tea, water, soap, jam, paint*
- Human feelings or qualities: *beauty, fear, anger, love*
- Abstract concepts, ideas or qualities: *information, knowledge, luck, safety, money, evidence, weather, advice, transport*
- Nouns formed from verbs or adjectives: *reading, youth*
- The colours: *red, yellow, etc...*
- The names of sports and games: *football, billiards, chess, darts...*

⚠ These nouns are invariable and always followed by a verb in the singular:

- Her hair is black.

### How to quantify uncountable nouns

To indicate a quantity of elements, or to isolate a unit from a set represented by an uncountable noun, it is sometimes necessary to use **expressions or measures** that make it possible to count them more or less precisely (also called "enumerator"): *some, a lot of, a bit of, a cup of, a bag of, a handful of, a pinch of..*

- a bag of flour
- a bowl of soup
- a cup of tea
- a game of tennis
- a glimmer of hope
- a handful of almonds
- a kilo of rice
- a loaf of bread
- a lump of sugar
- a means of transport
- a piece of advice
- a piece of cake
- a piece of fruit
- a piece of furniture
- a pinch of salt
- a sheet of paper
- a slice of bread
- a spoonful of jam
- some advice

⚠ Some singular uncountable nouns are not used with a enumerator. It may be that:

- Some nouns formed from verbs: *advertising, skating...*
- Some disease names: *AIDS, flu, measles...*
- Abstract values: *business, happiness, justice, poverty, unemployment, weather...*
- Names in -ics: *athletics, economics, electronics, mathematics, mechanics, physics, politics...*

⚠ The article 'a' is sometimes found in front of some uncountable nouns, in some expressions in particular:

- I'm in a hurry
- What a relief!
- What a shame!

An uncountable singular can be replaced by a countable noun, which can be completely different:

Uncountable nouns	Countable nouns
accomodation	a room, a flat
advertising	an advertisement
fishing	a good catch
homework	an exercise
progress	a breakthrough

travel a trip, a journey

work a job

Compare:

- He's looking for work (in general)
- He's looking for a job (something specific)

⚠ The word hair is normally uncountable in English, so it is used in the singular. It can also become countable only when it refers to one hair:

- She has long blond hair.
- I washed my hair yesterday.
- I found a hair in my soup!

Plural uncountable nouns

Some uncountable names are always in the plural:: clothes, contents, customs, goods, looks, morals, oats, stairs, jeans, pyjamas, shorts, trousers, tights, binoculars, glasses, pliers, scales, scissors...

They always match with a plural verb!

- Where are the binoculars?
- Those stairs don't look very safe.

If you want to talk about one or more specific objects, you must use an enumerator:

- two flights of stairs
- I need three pair of jeans
- a pair of scissors

Plural uncountable nouns with a collective meaning

Nouns like *clergy*, *police*, *poultry*, *cattle*... have a collective meaning: contrary to their appearance, they are true plurals and they always require a verb in the plural, with the personal pronoun *they*:

- Cattle are fed with grass
- The police are coming

Category change

Some countable nouns can be used as uncountable nouns: they change their meaning and function:

- Give me a glass of wine. (the container)
- Look out for broken glass. (the material)
- I've got two chickens in my garden. (birds)
- I've had chicken for lunch. (meat)