

Countable and uncountable nouns in English

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)