



GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Using Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Nouns are words that name a person, place, thing, or concept (e.g., **history, transportation, water, honesty, Christianity, Buddhism**). 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).

USING COUNTABLE NOUNS

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)

USING UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

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 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
air	gravity	money	scenery
assistance	happiness	music	shopping
behavior	health	news	significance
boredom	heat	nonsense	slang
bravery	help	oxygen	snow
chemistry	homework	participation	status
clothing	honesty	pay	stuff
comprehension	ignorance	peace	superiority
courage	immigration	permission	survival
darkness	inferiority	physics	tolerance
economics	information	poetry	traffic
efficiency	integration	pollution	transportation
electricity	intelligence	poverty	trouble
enjoyment	irritability	pride	violence
entertainment	isolation	productivity	water
estimation	junk	progress	wealth
equipment	justice	propaganda	weather
evidence	knowledge	psychology	wisdom
evolution	laughter	rain	
excitement	leisure	recreation	
fame	literature	relaxation	

NOUNS THAT CAN BE BOTH COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE

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. Many food items fall into this category, for example, **chicken, cheese, and fruit**. Thus, we see **a chicken** on a farm, but we eat **chicken**; we say that the tomato is **a fruit**, not a vegetable, but we like **fruit** on our cereal. Individual servings of food items are usually countable, but not the food itself, for example: **a piece** of pie, **a slice** of bread, or **a stick** of gum.

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.

Countable: Numerous **faiths** were represented at the conference.

Uncountable: He found strength in his **faith**.

COMMON NOUNS THAT CAN BE BOTH COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE

abuse	drama	jail	reading
adulthood	duck	jealousy	religion
afternoon	education	language	revision
age	environment	law	rock
anger	evening	liberty	science
appearance	exercise	life	school
art	fact	love	shock
beauty	faith	lunch	society
beer	fear	man	sorrow
belief	fiction	marriage	space
breakfast	film	meat	speech
cheese	fish	metal	spirit
chicken	flavor	milk	stone
childhood	food	morning	strength
cloth	freedom	murder	surprise
college	friendship	nature	teaching
commitment	fruit	paper	temptation
competition	glass	passion	theater
concern	government	people	theory
crime	hair	personality	time
culture	hatred	philosophy	tradition
death	history	pleasure	trouble
desire	home	power	truth
dinner	hope	prejudice	turkey
disappointment	ideology	pressure	understanding
discrimination	imagination	prison	weakness
disease	injustice	punishment	wine
divorce	innocence	race	writing