

Countable and uncountable nouns

Adapted from "First Certificate Language Practice" by Michael Vince

uncountable nouns

Explanations

- **Countable nouns**

A countable noun has a singular and a plural form. We can use a singular or plural verb with it. We can use numbers with it.

*Where **is** my shirt? Where **are** my shirts?*

a shirt, shirts, some shirts, four shirts

- **Uncountable nouns**

An uncountable noun has only one form. We can only use a singular verb with it. We cannot use numbers with it.

*Here **is** some **advice** for you.*

advice, some advice

However, we can count an uncountable noun indirectly by using a phrase like *a piece of, a bit of*.

*When I left home my mother gave me **two** useful **bits of** advice.*

*I've found out **several** interesting **pieces of** information.*

A few uncountable nouns end in -s, but they follow the normal rules for uncountable nouns and have a singular verb.

*The **news is** very bad today. **Billiards is** an interesting game.*

- **Typical uncountable nouns**

Substances: *water, air, coffee, plastic, iron, paper* Abstract

ideas: *life, fun, freedom, health, time, progress*

Activities: *work, travel, sleep, football, help, research*

Human feelings: *happiness, anger, honesty, hope, respect,*

Groups of items: *furniture, luggage*

Other words are found in the Practice section. Note the words below which are uncountable in English but countable in many other languages: *accommodation, advice, behaviour, business, cash,*

equipment, furniture, health, homework, information, knowledge, luggage, money, permission, rubbish, scenery, traffic, travel, weather, work

- **Uncountable nouns that describe a category**

Some uncountable nouns can be used in a countable way when they describe a category.

Uncountable use: *Would you like **some fruit** after your coffee?*

Use as a category: *There are **two main fruits** exported from Madeira, bananas and pineapples.*

- **Change of meaning**

Some words have different meanings in countable and uncountable forms. Countable:

<i>an iron</i>	(domestic appliance)
<i>a wood</i>	(small area of trees)
<i>a paper</i>	(newspaper)
<i>a chicken</i>	(the animal)
Uncountable:	
<i>some iron</i>	(a substance/material)
<i>some wood</i>	(a substance/material)
<i>some paper</i>	(a substance/material)
<i>chicken</i>	(the meat)

There is a similar contrast between:

Item: *a coffee* (a cup of coffee)

Material: *coffee*

- **Other examples with a change of meaning:**

business (in general) *a business* (a company)

gossip (talking) *a gossip* (a person)

hair (all together) *a hair* (a single strand)

help (in general) *a help* (a helpful person/thing)

toast (grilled bread) *a toast* (formal words said before drinking)

work (in general) *a work* (a work of art/engineering)

- **Plural nouns**

These nouns only have a plural form and take a plural verb.

*My trousers **are** too tight. The stairs **are** very steep.*

Other common examples are:

clothes, contents, feelings, goods, jeans, means, outskirts, surroundings, thanks

- **Group nouns**

Some nouns can be followed by either a singular or plural verb.

*I think the government **is/are** wrong.*

It depends whether we think of the group as a whole (singular verb), or its individual members (plural verb). Other common examples:

army, audience, class, company, crew, crowd, data, family, group, media, press, public, staff, team

Some group nouns only take a plural verb: *cattle, police, people*

Key points

Check in a dictionary to be sure that a noun is countable or uncountable. The meaning of a noun may change depending on whether it is used in a countable or uncountable sense.

Note that some nouns ending in -s take a singular verb:

*The news **is** bad today*

And that some nouns only have a plural form:

*The police **are** arriving shortly.*