

Using Count and Noncount Nouns



Writing Center

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COUNT NOUNS

Count nouns are things we can count. They can be used in **both singular and plural forms**. Most countable nouns are made plural by adding *-s* or *-es*. Note that the ending *-y* changes to *-ies* when *-y* is preceded by a consonant.

Examples: one computer, two computers, three computers
an eyelash, ten eyelashes
a party, two parties

Some count nouns do not use *-s* to form the plural:

Examples: one child, two children
one tooth, ten teeth
one deer, ten deer (*deer* is a count noun that can be used for both singular and plural forms.)

Use *many*, *few*, *a few*, *each*, *every*, and *several* with count nouns in plural form:

Examples: many chairs, few chairs, a few chairs, each chair, every chair,
several chairs

Note: A count noun always requires an article (*a*, *an* or *the*) in English.

NONCOUNT NOUNS

Noncount nouns, or mass nouns, are things that can't be counted, such as *happiness*, *furniture*, or *milk*. They cannot be made plural.

Examples: **Happiness** is often elusive for some people.
Her grandmother's **furniture** is very old.
Milk provides a significant amount of calcium.

Some words of quantity (such as *a little* or *much*) are used only with noncount nouns. Expressions such as *a great deal of*, *much*, *a little*, *little* and *less* are also used only with noncount nouns.

Examples: I hope you don't have too **much homework** over the weekend.
A little milk is good for you.
I wish him **a great deal of happiness**.

Some common types of noncount nouns:

- **groups consisting of similar items:**
furniture, jewelry, luggage, makeup, traffic, money/change/cash, scenery
- **fluids:**
water, coffee, milk, blood
- **gases:**
oxygen, nitrogen, steam, air
- **substances:**
bread, cheese, butter, ice, iron, silver, glass
- **particles:**
rice, chalk, pepper, flour, salt, sugar
- **abstract ideas or qualities:**
knowledge, beauty, anger, fear, love, information, news, space, energy, grammar, vocabulary
- **nouns formed from verbs:**
studying, drawing, swimming
- **languages:**
Chinese, English, Spanish, Arabic
- **fields of study:**
biology, chemistry, engineering, history
- **games and sports:**
football, tennis, chess, poker
- **natural phenomena:**
rain, sunshine, fog, hail, snow, thunder, heat

(Azar, 1999, Understanding and Using English Grammar)

NOUNS THAT ARE BOTH COUNT AND NONCOUNT

Many nouns in English can be used as both count and noncount nouns. Often, however, there is a difference in meaning.

- Examples:
- I bought **a paper**. (a newspaper - countable)
 - I bought **some paper**. (material for writing on - uncountable)
 - There is **a hair** in my soup! (one single hair - countable)
 - She has beautiful **hair**. (hair on her head - uncountable)