

English grammar

Countable and uncountable nouns

Grammar rules with examples

Countable nouns

Countable nouns are people, places, animals or things that we can count.

We can use the indefinite article *a/an* with countable nouns in singular forms: *A bee is an insect.*

Plural forms of countable nouns can be regular (a car - cars, boy - boys, baby - babies) or irregular (woman - women, wolf - wolves, datum - data).

More examples: *a girl - two girls, a lion - two lions, a book - two books, a man - three men, a sheep - five sheep*

Uncountable nouns

Uncountable nouns (or mass nouns) are substances, abstract ideas, qualities and other things that we cannot count. We cannot usually use the indefinite article *a/an* with uncountable nouns: *I need money.*

Substances:

air, bread, butter, dust, fire, flour, fuel, gold, ice, jam, juice, milk, oil, oxygen, petrol, rice, salt, sand, smoke, snow, soap, sugar, water, wheat...

Abstract nouns:

advice, aid, anger, art, beauty, cash, chaos, courage, damage, death, evidence, freedom, fun, happiness, health, help, horror, information, kindness, knowledge, love, motivation, pity, relief, safety, wealth, wisdom...

Other things:

baggage, camping, cash, clothing, electricity, energy, food, furniture, literature, litter, luggage, money, nature, news, parking, rubbish, shopping, sunshine, traffic, weather...

Nouns that are both countable and uncountable

Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable, but they have a different meaning.

beer = kind of drink, beers = glasses of beer

chicken = kind of meat, chickens = animals

chocolate = kind of food, chocolates = small sweets in a box of chocolates

coffee = kind of drink, coffees = cups of coffee

experience = kind of knowledge, experiences = things that happen to you

glass = material, glasses = cups

hair = hair on your head, hairs = animal hairs

light = brightness from the sun, lights = electric lamps or bulbs

paper = material, papers = newspapers

people = human beings, peoples = nations or ethnic groups

room = space, rooms = living room, bedroom, etc.

wood = material, woods = forest

work = job, works = factory

Notes

Some abstract nouns can be used with *a/an* in special cases. Compare:

- *help*

I need help. - You are always a great help to me.

- *knowledge, love, hatred, dread, horror, etc. + of*

The internet provides access to all universal knowledge. - A good knowledge of English is essential. Is it love or hatred? - How to foster a love of music in children?

- *pity, shame, wonder, etc.*

I don't want pity, I need support. - What a pity. It's a pity that you can't come.

Some abstract nouns can be used in plural with *that*-clauses introduced by *there*.

- *fear, hope, suspicion, etc.*

There are fears that global warming will continue.

How to make uncountable nouns countable

We combine special words (piece words) with uncountable nouns to make them countable.

I have two pieces of information for you.

We'll need three sheets of paper.

How many slices of bread do you have for breakfast?

Add two spoonfuls of sugar.

I'd like three jars of jam.

a bit of fun, luck, time, work, paper, information, bread, money, news, gossip

a piece of paper, software, information, work, writing, furniture, wood, equipment, music, cloth, land

an item of clothing, equipment, furniture, food, information, interest, business, jewellery, news

a sheet of paper, ice, glass

a carton of milk, juice, yoghurt

a glass of milk, beer, wine

a cup of tea, coffee

a slice of bread, cheese, cake

a loaf of bread, cheese, meat

a bar of chocolate, soap

a spoonful of sugar, flour, salt

a pinch of salt, cinnamon, humour

a jar of jam, honey, beer, mayonnaise

Little / few, a little / a few, much / many

We use *little*, *a little* and *much* with singular uncountable nouns to express quantity.

We use *few*, *a few* and *many* with plural countable nouns to express quantity.

Little / few

We had very little information about the hotel. (= not much information)

We learned very few facts about the hotel. (= not many facts)

A little / a few

I can help you. I have a little time now. (= some time)

I can help you. I have a few hours to spare. (= several hours)

Note

Little and *few* have negative meanings. They mean 'not as much or not as many as I expected'.
A little and *a few* have positive meanings. They mean 'better than nothing'.

Compare:

I have little money and few friends. (= I feel unhappy. I want more money and friends.)

I have a little money and a few friends. (= I feel happier. I have some money and several friends.)

Much / many

My brother won much money with a lottery ticket. (= a lot of money)

My brother bought many lottery tickets. (a lot of tickets)

A lot of, some, hardly any

These quantifiers can be used with countable and uncountable nouns in affirmative sentences. They are more informal than the quantifiers mentioned above.

A lot of (lots of, plenty of)

We can use *a lot of*, *lots of* or *plenty of* instead of *much*, *many*.

We had a lot of fun (much fun) at the party. (uncountable)

We had a lot of drinks (many drinks) at the party. (countable)

Some

We can use *some* instead of *a little* and *a few*.

I would like some more coffee (a little more coffee). (uncountable)

I would like some more biscuits (a few more biscuits). (countable)

Hardly any

We can use *hardly any* instead of *little* and *few*.

Samantha has hardly any (little) experience with programming. (uncountable)

George has hardly any (few) problems with programming. (countable)

Countable and uncountable nouns exercises:

www.e-grammar.org/countable-uncountable-exercises/

Our tip: www.e-grammar.org/pdf-books/ All PDF exercises + grammar rules in one place.