Singular and plural nouns

Grammar rules with examples

We normally make the plural by adding -s to the singular of a noun:

- a pen - two pens, a window - three windows, a tree - a lot of trees, a boy - many boys

There are, however, a lot of exceptions to this rule.

1. Nouns ending in -ss, -sh, -ch, -x, -o.
   - We add -es to the noun that ends in -ss, -sh, -ch, -x.
     - dress - dresses, dish - dishes, match - matches, box - boxes
   - Nouns ending in -o can form their plural by adding -es, too.
     - hero - heroes, potato - potatoes, tomato - tomatoes, torpedo - torpedoes
   - But we often add -s only to the words ending in -o which are of foreign origin or abbreviated.
     - avocado - avocados, kimono - kimonos, piano - pianos, zero - zeros, kilo - kilos, photo - photos
   - Some nouns ending in -o can have both plural forms, -s or -es.
     - banjo - banjos/banjoes, flamingo - flamingos/flamingoes, ghetto - ghettos/ghettoes, motto - mottos/mottoes, tornado - tornados/tornadoes

2. Nouns ending in -y.
   - If the noun ends in a consonant and -y, we change -y into -i and add -es.
     - activity - activities, baby - babies, berry - berries, country - countries, fly - flies, lady - ladies
   - But we add -s only to the nouns ending in a vowel plus -y.
     - boy - boys, day - days, guy - guys, key - keys, way - ways

3. Nouns ending in -f or -fe.
   - Some nouns ending in -f or -fe make the plural in the following way.
     - calf - calves, half - halves, knife - knives, leaf - leaves, life - lives, loaf - loaves, sheaf - sheaves, shelf - shelves, thief - thieves, wife - wives, wolf - wolves
   - Other nouns make their plural in the normal way by adding -s.
     - chief - chiefs, cliff - cliffs, gulf - gulfs, proof - proofs, roof - roofs, safe - safes
   - The following words can have two plural forms.
     - dwarf - dwarfs/dwarves, handkerchief - handkerchiefs/handkerchieves, hoof - hoofs/hooves, scarf - scarfs/scarves, wharf - wharfs/wharves

4. Plural forms made by a vowel change.
   - A few nouns make their plural forms by changing their vowels.
     - foot - feet, goose - geese, man - men, tooth - teeth, woman - women
5. Specific changes in plural forms.

- Some English nouns change in spelling substantially in their plural forms.
  child - children, die - dice, louse - lice, mouse - mice, ox - oxen, person - people

6. Nouns that do not change in the plural.

Some words have the same form in the singular and plural.  
I can see one sheep on the hill. - How many sheep can you see?

- Names of some fish and animals.
  carp, cod, mackerel, pike, plaice, salmon, squid, trout, cattle, deer, moose, sheep, swine

- Other words that do not change.
  barracks, craft (aircraft, spacecraft...), gallows, means, quid, series, species

7. Nouns that are always plural.

Some nouns always have a plural form, take a plural verb and cannot be used with numbers.
Your clothes are in the other room.  
The goods have been delivered.

- Things which have two parts.
  binoculars, glasses, headphones, jeans, knickers, pants, pyjamas, scales, scissors, tights, trousers

  We use pair of if we want to count them.
  I need two pairs of new tights and a pair of jeans.

- Some other nouns.
  arms (weapons), belongings, clothes, congratulations, earnings, goods, grounds, likes/dislikes, outskirts, savings, stairs, surroundings, thanks, valuables

8. Nouns that are always singular.

Some nouns have a plural form, but take a singular verb, such as news.
The good news is that we can go on holiday now.

- Names of sciences and activities.
  acoustics, athletics, classics, economics, ethics, gymnastics, mathematics/maths, physics, politics

- Names of diseases.
  measles, mumps, rabies, rickets, shingles

- Names of games.
  billiards, bowls, checkers, darts, dominoes, draughts, hearts


Many Latin and Greek words used in English retain their original plural forms. Others follow English grammar rules.

- Nouns with the Latin or Greek plural.
  alumnus - alumni, fungus - fungi, nucleus - nuclei
axis - axes, analysis - analyses, crisis - crises, oasis - oases, thesis - theses
bacterium - bacteria, datum - data, erratum - errata, stratum - strata
criterion - criteria, phenomenon - phenomena

Notes

Different plural forms can sometimes have different meanings.
indexes = tables of contents, indices = collections of information in alphabetical order
brothers = siblings / brethren = members of the same comunity

Some singular forms can have different meanings than plural forms.
arm = part of human body, arms = weapons
content = amount of a substance, contents = everything that is contained within something
wood = material, woods = small forest

Singular and plural noun exercises:

www.e-grammar.org/singular-plural-exercises/

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