

Nouns

Grammar rules with examples

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Countable and uncountable nouns

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.*

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, whea...

▪ 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.

- *help:*

I need some 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)

Singular and plural nouns

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

9. Nouns of Latin and Greek origin.

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 community

- 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

Compound nouns

A compound noun is a noun that is formed from two or more unique words and has a more specific meaning than the separate words. The compound word can be written as separate words (*mother tongue*), as a single word (*grandmother*) or with hyphens (*mother-in-law*).

Types of compound nouns

- Open compound nouns = separate words:
swimming pool, first aid, hot dog
- Closed compound nouns = a single word:
grandmother, snowball, railway
- Hyphenated compound nouns = words connected with hyphens:
check-in, mother-in-law, merry-go-round

Possible combinations

We can combine various parts of speech to make compound nouns.

Noun + noun:

traffic warden, petrol station, shop window
seaside, website, Iceland
hitch-hiker, fire-fly, paper-clip

Adjective + noun:

small talk, full moon, last will
blackbird, hardware, greenhouse

Combinations with gerunds:

fruit picking, gold mining, waiting list, driving licence
trainspotting, haircutting, storytelling
price-fixing, weight-lifting, dining-room

Combinations with prepositions:

output, checkout, onlooker
passer-by, check-in, father-in-law

Open compound nouns

The open compound noun is made up of two words that are written as separate words but their combination creates a new, single meaning.

air force, fairy tale, street lamp, goose bumps, first aid, hot dog, remote control, fire engine, bank clerk, prime minister, credit card

Closed compound nouns

The closed compound noun combines two words that are written as one word with a new meaning.

airmail, banknote, billboard, earthworm, honeymoon, keyboard, outlook, overcoat, painkiller, password, rainbow, runway, sweetheart, swordfish

Hyphenated compound nouns

The hyphenated compound noun is a combination of two or more words that are connected with hyphens. They are less common in modern English than in the past.

co-worker, editor-in-chief, hanger-on, happy-go-lucky, mass-production, passer-by, runner-up, word-of-mouth, forget-me-not

Plurals of compound nouns

We normally add -s to the last part of a compound noun to make the plural.

a shop window, two shop windows

a blackbird, a few blackbirds

a hitch-hiker, many hitch-hikers

But there are a few exceptions to this rule.

a passer-by, two passers-by (but two grown-ups)

a woman doctor, several women doctors (but several female doctors)

a sister-in-law, all my sisters-in-law (but merry-go-rounds)

Compound words in transition

There are no clear rules how to form a compound noun in English. With the relaxed attitude toward spelling, a lot of compound nouns gradually develop. A good dictionary will help you to find out how to write a compound word.

all right | alright

back yard | back-yard | backyard

check in | check-in

Group (collective) nouns

Collective (or group) nouns are nouns that have a singular form but they describe groups of people, animals or things.

Groups of people: *family, police, team, crew*

Groups of animals: *colony, flock, herd*

Groups of things: *bunch, bundle, set*

Collective nouns and verb agreement

Group (or collective) nouns can take a singular verb or plural verb: *The crew is/are on the ship.*

We use the singular verb if we refer to a group as a single unit.

Our family is going on holiday to Spain in summer.

The herd is lying quietly in the shadow of trees.

We use the plural verb if we refer to a group as a number of individuals.

Our family are going on holiday to different places in summer.

The herd are looking in all directions. They are frightened.

Similarly:

The jury has just announced a decision.(= a group acting as a single unit)

The jury were not allowed to contact their families. (= a group acting as a number of individuals)

Collective nouns for animals

Examples of the most common collective nouns for groups of animals:

Birds

a flock of birds, a gaggle of geese, a brood of hens, a clutch of chicks, a host of sparrows

Mammals

a herd of cows (sheep), a drove of pigs, a pack of wolves (dogs), a pride of lions, a troop of monkeys, a litter of puppies (kittens, cubs), a pod of dolphins

Fish

a school (shoal) of fish, a run of salmon, a battery of barracudas

Insects

a swarm of bees, a colony of ants, a cloud of grasshoppers, a scourge of mosquitoes

Reptiles

a float/bask of crocodiles (in water/on land), a lounge of lizards, a nest of snakes, a bale (dole) of turtles

Collective nouns for people

There are many collective nouns in English which refer to a group of people as a single unit or to individual members of a group and therefore can take a singular or plural verb (compare the examples above).

family, police, team, crew, choir, board, government, committee, jury, staff, Manchester United...

We can also use the following collective nouns to talk about groups of people.

a board of directors, a caravan of travellers, a circle of friends, a flock of tourists, a tribe of Indians, a bevy of beauties, a crowd of people, a gang of youths

Collective nouns for things

Examples of the most common collective nouns to describe groups of things.

a bouquet (bunch) of flowers, a bunch of keys, a bundle of sticks, a fleet of taxis (ships), a convoy of trucks, a flight of aeroplanes (stairs), a clump of bushes, a round of drinks, a range of mountains, a pack of cards, a set of golf clubs

Proper nouns

Proper nouns are the names of particular people, animals, organizations, places and other things. Unlike common nouns they always begin with capital letters.

Compare (common/proper noun):

teacher/Mrs. Clark, gallery/the National Gallery, mountain/Mount Everest, month/January

There are many types of proper nouns that begin with a capital letter. Some of them are used with the definite article *the*, others are used without *the*.

Proper nouns with *the*:

The definite article (*the*) is used before:

Plural names of people: *the Collins* (= *the Collin family*)

Plural names of countries and country names that include common names: *the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic*

Nations (*the* + adjective): *the Spanish, the Polish, the British*

Seas and rivers: *the Adriatic, the Atlantic Ocean, the Thames, the Mississippi River*

Groups of islands and chains of mountains: *the Azores, the Bahamas, the British Isles, the Alps, the Andes, the Himalayas*

Deserts and regions: *the Sahara, the Gobi Desert, the Riviera, the Crimea*

Most organizations: *the Bush Administration, the Rotary Club, the Ford Foundation, the Supreme Court, the Senate* (but *Congress*)

Newspapers: *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, The Daily Mirror* (but *USA Today*)

Historical and cultural periods: *the Bronze Age, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance*

Most names made with 'of': *the London School of Economics, the Statue of Liberty, the Tower of London, the Bank of New York* (but *Bank of America*)

Most names consisting of adjective + common noun: *the National Gallery, the British Museum, the North Pole, the West End, the High Street, the Republican Party* (but *North America, West Germany* = an adjective + proper name)

Some other names: *the City, the Mall, the Bronx*

Proper nouns without *the*:

The definite article (*the*) is not used before:

Names and titles of people: *William, Angelina Jolie, President Kennedy, Captain Cook, Detective Poirot, Doctor Watson*

Names of animals: *Simba, Spot, Fluffy*

Languages, nationalities or ethnic groups: *Spanish, Polish, Hindi, Han Chinese*

Countries consisting of a singular proper name and continents: *Spain, Vietnam, Britain, Ghana, India, Asia, Australia, Europe*

Streets, squares, towns, cities: *Broadway, Oxford Street, Times Square, Trafalgar Square, Dover, New York* (but *the Cathedral Square, the Hague*)

Lakes and ponds: *Lake Victoria, Lake Superior, Great Pond*

Islands and mountain peaks: *Borneo, New Guinea, Madagascar, Mont Blanc, Mount Everest, Aconcagua, Mount Kenya*

Parks and amusement parks: *Central Park, Hyde Park, Disneyland, Europa Park, Everland*

Most magazines: *Newsweek, Vogue, National Geographic, PC World, Better Homes and Gardens* (but *The New Yorker, The Economist*)

Brands: *Jack Daniel's, Kit Kat, Coca - Cola, Mercedes - Benz, Panasonic*

Days, months and holidays: *Monday, July, New Year's Eve, Halloween, Labour Day, Thanksgiving*

Religious names: *Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism*

Most places named after a person or a town: *Mario's Pizzeria, McDonald's, St Peter's Cathedral, Vaclav Havel Airport, Edinburgh Castle, Carnegie Hall, Rockefeller Center* (but *the Royal Albert Hall, the John Hancock Center, the Sears Tower*)

Proper nouns with *the* or without *the*

There are, however, many categories of proper nouns used with *the* or without *the*. For example:

Buildings and places of interest: *Burj Khalifa, Capital Hotel, Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, the Hilton Hotel, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Taj Mahal, the Sydney Opera House*
 Schools: *Columbia University, Boston College/the Sorbonne, the U. S. Military Academy*
 Companies: *General Motors, Bank of America/the Ford Motor Company, the World Bank*
 Bridges: *London Bridge, Tower Bridge/the Golden Gate Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge*
 Works of art: *Mona Lisa, Girl with a Pearl Earring, Guitar, Bust of Nefertiti/the Sistine Madonna, the Nightwatch, the Burghers of Calais, the Terracota Army*

Capitalizing tricky proper nouns

If a common noun (*mum, pope, president, captain*) becomes a proper noun, it begins with a capital letter. The rule is, when we use such words, we capitalize them only if we use them exactly as names.

You can ask Mom. (but *You can ask your mum.*)
I'd like to meet Pope Francis. (but *I'd like to meet the pope.*)
Where was President Lincoln assassinated? (but *Who was the first president of the USA?*)
It was in 1778, when Captain Cook discovered the Hawaiian Islands. (but *Who is the captain of this ship?*)

Grammar rules and exercises:

www.e-grammar.org/nouns/

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