

Countable and uncountable nouns

What is a noun?

Look around you. Everything you see is a noun! (desk, computer, phone, car). Nouns are therefore objects and things. But they can also be non-physical things like ideas.

A noun is a word that names:

Things – Examples: table, chair, water.

People – Examples: Mark, Jane, pilot, driver.

Animals – Examples: dog, cat.

Places – Examples: London, kitchen, country.

Concepts, ideas or feelings – Examples: love, hate, jealousy, information.

2 types of noun – Countable and uncountable

In English grammar, we divide nouns into 2 categories or types:

- 1) Countable nouns
- 2) Uncountable nouns

Why do we divide nouns into these 2 groups? Why is it important to know if a noun is countable or uncountable? It is important because English grammar rules are different for countable and uncountable nouns. You must understand and learn the difference.

Let's look at each type in more detail:

Countable nouns

A countable noun is a separate object. It is a separate unit. We can clearly count the number of units of a countable noun. An example is "apple".

A countable noun has a singular form (when there is one unit). Example: I have one apple.

It also has a plural form (where there is more than 1 unit) For regular nouns, we usually form the plural by adding "s" – Example: I have two apples.

We can count countable nouns because it is clear to see they are separate units.

In the singular form, we can use the indefinite article ("a" / "an"). **Example:** I am eating an apple.

Examples of countable nouns: cat, lemon, desk, bus, bowl, sandwich, radio and many more.

Uncountable nouns

An uncountable noun is not a separate object or unit. We cannot count uncountable nouns. It is a large solid mass or liquid without clear boundaries. An example is "water" We cannot count water. We do NOT say "I have 3 waters" – It does not make sense. Water is a liquid and is just one big amount all together.

Uncountable nouns only have a singular form. **Example:** I have some water. ✓

There is no plural form for uncountable nouns. I have some waters. ✗

We cannot use the indefinite article ("a" / "an") **Example:** I have a water. ✗

Uncountable nouns are therefore names of materials, gases, liquids, concepts, collections, mass objects without boundaries.

Examples: sugar, butter, oxygen, rice, pasta, salt, bread, milk, water

Example sentences:

The pasta is very nice. ✓

(Notice that "pasta" is in the singular form. The verb "is" (third person singular of the verb "be") is also the singular form to agree with the subject.

The pastas are very nice. ✗

(This is wrong because pasta does not have a plural form!)

Can I have some pasta? ✓

He served me some pasta. ✓
(pasta is singular)

More examples of uncountable nouns:

advice, air, alcohol, blood, butter, cheese, coffee, education, flour, food, furniture, grass, ice, information, luggage, meat, milk, money, music, news, oxygen, paper, pepper, rain, rice, salt, sand, snow, sugar, toothpaste, wine, wood and many more.

As you can see, "advice", "information" and "news" are all uncountable in English. This often confuses ESL students because, in many other languages, these words are countable. Example, in French we say "des informations" and "un conseil" But in English, they are considered uncountable and do NOT have a plural form. "news" has a letter "s" on the end, but it is in fact singular.

Here are some examples showing the correct and incorrect versions:

He gave me some good advice. ✓

He gave me some good advices. ✗

Can I have some information? ✓

Can I have an information? ✗

The news is good ✓

The news are good. ✗

Some nouns are both countable and uncountable.

Some nouns can be considered as either countable or uncountable. It depends on the situation and context.

Example with the noun "chocolate"

Situation 1 – Imagine a box of chocolates.

There are lots of separate chocolates inside the box. They are individual entities. I can count them. "chocolate" in this context is countable.

We say:

"Do you want a chocolate?"

"I ate three chocolates. They were delicious."

Situation 2 – A bar of chocolate.

It is a mass of chocolate. Not separate. We cannot count this. "chocolate" in this context is uncountable.

We say:

"Do you want some chocolate?"

"I ate some chocolate."

Using a countable unit with an uncountable noun

Sometimes, we can use a "countable unit" with an uncountable noun. It is a way of sort of dividing up the uncountable noun. We can then put the countable unit in its plural form to express an amount of the uncountable noun.

Example: "water"

Water is an uncountable noun because it is a liquid. We cannot count water. We say: "Do you want some water?"

But, we can use a "countable unit" – Example: "glass"

Now we can say "Do you want a glass of water?"

Please understand that "water" is still an uncountable noun. That has not changed. But we are able to use the countable units (glass, jug, litre) to express a quantity of that water.

Other examples of this:

bowl of rice

slice of bread

piece of cheese