Nouns in Depth (Countable and Uncountable Nouns)

Lecture notes · English Grammar Foundations · Module 1: Words and sentences

Learning objectives

O1	Tell countable nouns from uncountable nouns, using three simple tests.
O2	Make the plural of countable nouns, including common irregular plurals.
O3	Choose the right partner words: a / an, singular or plural verbs, many / much, a few / a little, a lot of, some.
O4	Count uncountable things with unit words (a glass of, a piece of), and use nouns that can be both countable and uncountable.

Prerequisites: KN-GEN-ENG-C01-M01-T01-L01 (what a noun is). Able to read simple English sentences.

Contents: 1. Two kinds of noun · 2. Grammar, not the real world · 3. Three tests (and the dictionary) · 4. Plural spelling rules · 5. Partner words · 6. Counting the uncountable, and nouns that can be both · Worked examples · Summary · References

1. Two kinds of noun

A countable noun names something English treats as separate, single things: an apple, two apples; a student, thirty students. Countable nouns have a singular form (one) and a plural form (more than one).

An uncountable noun names something English treats as one whole mass: water, rice, sugar, advice, information, music, happiness. Uncountable nouns have only one form. We say rice, never rices; information, never informations.

Typical uncountable groups: liquids (water, milk, juice, oil); powders, grains and materials (rice, sugar, flour, sand, wood, paper); ideas and feelings (advice, information, knowledge, music, love, happiness); and some group words (furniture, luggage, money, equipment, homework).

2. Grammar, not the real world

Countable or uncountable is about how English treats the word, not about whether the thing can be counted in real life. Chairs, tables and beds can be counted, but the word furniture is uncountable. Coins and notes can be counted, but money is uncountable.

Other languages may treat a word differently. For example, many languages have a plural for 'information' or 'advice'. In English these words stay singular, so learn them as a list.

The analogy of bricks (countable) and water (uncountable) is a starting picture only: it breaks down for group words like furniture, luggage and money.

3. Three tests (and the dictionary)

Test 1: Can you put a number in front? two chairs (yes) / two furnitures (no). Test 2: Does it have a plural? chairs (yes) / furnitures (no). Test 3: Can you put a or an in front? a chair (yes) / a furniture (no).

If a noun passes all three tests, it is countable. If it fails all three, it is uncountable. Learner's dictionaries mark nouns [C] or [U]; some meanings are marked [C, U] because the noun can be both.

The flowchart below summarises the decision.

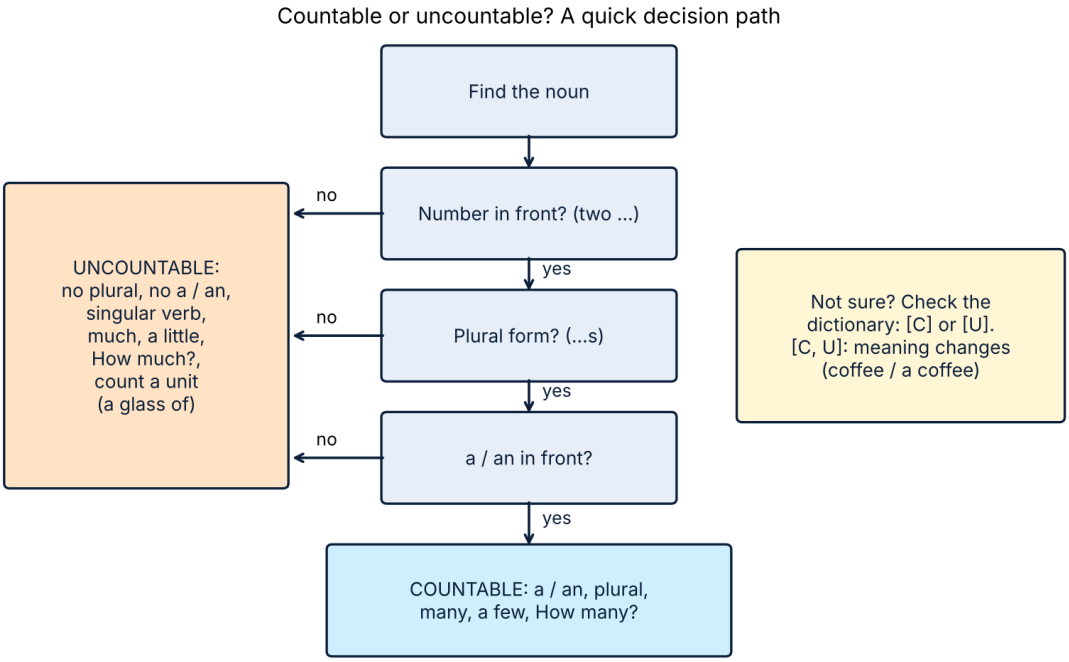


Figure 1. Apply the three tests in order; the dictionary mark settles any doubt.

4. Plural spelling rules

Most nouns: add -s. book books, car cars, apple apples.

Nouns ending in -s, -sh, -ch or -x: add -es. bus buses, dish dishes, watch watches, box boxes. The -es adds a syllable that makes the word easier to say.

Consonant + y: change y to i and add -es. city cities, baby babies. Vowel + y: just add -s. boy boys, day days, key keys.

Many nouns ending in -f or -fe change to -ves: knife knives, leaf leaves, wife wives, half halves. Some do not: roof roofs, chef chefs. Check new words in a dictionary.

Irregular plurals must be learned: child children, man men, woman women, person people, foot feet, tooth teeth, mouse mice. Some nouns have the same form: one sheep, two sheep; one fish, three fish.

5. Partner words

A / an means one, so it is used only with singular countable nouns: a chair, an egg, an idea. Never a rice, an advice, a furniture. Use an before a vowel sound (an apple, an hour) and a before a consonant sound (a book, a university).

An uncountable noun takes a singular verb: The water is cold. The information is useful. My luggage is heavy. News looks plural but is uncountable: The news is good.

Questions: How many + plural countable noun (How many apples?). How much + uncountable noun (How much rice?).

Many and a few go with plural countable nouns: many books, a few friends. Much and a little go with uncountable nouns: not much money, a little sugar. A few / a little mean 'a small amount, but some'.

SIMPLIFIED RULE: much is most natural in questions and negative sentences. In positive sentences we usually say a lot of: We have a lot of rice (more natural than 'We have much rice'). A lot of, lots of and some work with both groups.

6. Counting the uncountable, and nouns that can be both

To count an uncountable thing, count a unit: a glass of water, a cup of coffee, a bag of rice, a loaf of bread, a slice of cake, a bottle of milk, a kilo of sugar. For ideas and group words use piece: a piece of advice, a piece of information, a piece of furniture.

The unit word becomes plural; the uncountable noun never changes: two glasses of water, three pieces of advice (never two glasses of waters).

Some nouns are countable with one meaning and uncountable with another: coffee (the drink) / two coffees (two cups, in a cafe); chicken (meat) / a chicken (the bird); paper (material) / a paper (a newspaper); time (I don't have much time) / three times (three occasions); hair (all of it) / a hair (one strand).

Pronouncing plural endings

The plural ending is spelled -s or -es but pronounced in three ways. After a voiceless sound such as /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/: /s/ (cups, cats, books). After a voiced sound, including all vowels: /z/ (dogs, cars, days, bananas). After a hissing or hushing sound (s, z, sh, ch, j, x): an extra syllable /z/ (buses, dishes, watches, boxes, oranges).

So 'box' has one syllable but 'boxes' has two. 'Book' and 'books' both have one.

Nouns that are always plural, and group nouns

Some nouns exist only in the plural and take a plural verb: trousers, jeans, scissors, glasses (for the eyes), clothes. My trousers are new. To count them, use pair: two pairs of jeans.

Police and people are plural: The police are here. Group nouns like team, family and class are countable (two teams); in British English they can take a plural verb when we think of the members (The team are happy), while American English normally uses a singular verb (The team is happy).

some, any and no

Some is common in positive sentences and offers: I have some eggs. Would you like some tea? Any is common in negatives and most questions: We don't have any milk. Do you have any questions? No means 'not any': There is no sugar. There are no chairs.

All three work with plural countable nouns and with uncountable nouns.

A method for choosing the right words

1. Find the noun. 2. Decide: countable or uncountable (use the three tests or the dictionary mark). 3. If countable and one: use a / an and a singular verb. If countable and more than one: use the plural form, a plural verb, many / a few / How many. 4. If uncountable: no a / an, no plural, a singular verb, much / a little / How much, and a unit word to count it. 5. Check whether the meaning changes (coffee / a coffee).

Example: 'I need (?) advice about (?) furniture.' Advice and furniture are uncountable, so: 'I need some advice about the furniture' or 'I need a piece of advice about two pieces of furniture.'

Common mistakes checklist

informations, advices, furnitures, luggages, homeworks, equipments, breads (as 'loaves') no plural.

an advice, a bread, a news some advice / a piece of advice; a loaf of bread; some news / a piece of news.

How much apples? How many apples? The people is The people are. The news are The news is. two glasses of waters two glasses of water.

Real-world application: shopping and ordering

In a shop: 'Can I have two kilos of rice and a dozen eggs, please?' 'How many bananas would you like?' 'How much sugar do you need?'

In a cafe, countable uses of uncountable drinks are normal and polite: 'Two coffees and a tea, please' means two cups of coffee and one cup of tea.

In an email: 'Thank you for the information. I have a few questions and would be grateful for some advice.' (information and advice: uncountable; questions: countable).

Worked examples

Worked example 1: sorting nouns with the three tests

Decide whether each noun is countable or uncountable: bottle, milk, suitcase, luggage, idea, advice.

Step 1. bottle: two bottles (number works), bottles (plural exists), a bottle (a / an works) countable.

Step 2. milk: two milks? (no, as a substance), milks? (no), a milk? (no) uncountable; count it with a unit: a bottle of milk.

Step 3. suitcase countable (a suitcase, two suitcases). luggage uncountable (my luggage is heavy; two pieces of luggage).

Step 4. idea countable (an idea, three ideas) even though you cannot touch it. advice uncountable (some advice, a piece of advice).

Step 5. Lesson: being abstract or physical does not decide the type; the tests and the dictionary do.

Worked example 2: making plurals step by step

Write the plural of: glass, baby, day, knife, roof, tooth, sheep.

Step 1. glass ends in -s add -es: glasses.

Step 2. baby: consonant (b) + y change y to i, add -es: babies.

Step 3. day: vowel (a) + y just add -s: days.

Step 4. knife: -fe -ves: knives. roof is an exception: roofs.

Step 5. tooth is irregular: teeth. sheep does not change: sheep.

Worked example 3: choosing quantity words

Complete with many, much, a few or a little: (a) How ___ eggs do we need? (b) There isn't ___ time. (c) Add ___ salt. (d) I have ___ friends in this city.

Step 1. (a) eggs is plural countable How many eggs?

Step 2. (b) time (here: uncountable) in a negative There isn't much time.

Step 3. (c) salt is uncountable; a small amount Add a little salt.

Step 4. (d) friends is plural countable; a small number I have a few friends in this city.

Worked example 4: correcting a short message

Correct the message: 'Hi! Thanks for the informations. Can you give me an advice? I need to buy some furnitures and two breads.'

Step 1. informations information (uncountable: no plural).

Step 2. an advice some advice / a piece of advice (no a / an with uncountable nouns).

Step 3. furnitures furniture (or some pieces of furniture).

Step 4. two breads two loaves of bread (count the unit; loaf loaves follows the -f -ves rule).

Step 5. Corrected: 'Hi! Thanks for the information. Can you give me some advice? I need to buy some furniture and two loaves of bread.'

Summary

• Countable nouns are separate things: they have a singular and a plural (an apple, two apples).

• Uncountable nouns are treated as one mass: no plural, no a / an, and a singular verb (The information is useful).

• Most plurals add -s or -es; consonant + y -ies; many -f / -fe -ves; learn the irregular ones (children, people, feet, teeth, mice).

• many / a few / How many? + countable; much / a little / How much? + uncountable; a lot of and some work with both.

• Count uncountable things with a unit: a glass of water, two pieces of advice. Some nouns change meaning: coffee / a coffee.

References

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