GRAMMARTOP

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You probably already know that nouns are words that name people, places, things, or ideas. You might also remember that there are different categories of nouns based on certain features they share. For example we can distinguish abstract and concrete nouns.

Another way we can categorize nouns is whether they are countable or uncountable. In this article, we'll explain the difference between these two categories, look at the examples of both and see why it is important to know whether a noun is countable or uncountable.

So, as we've already mentioned, nouns in English can be countable or uncountable.

via https://www.kidsworldfun.com/learn-english/countable-and-uncountable-nouns.php

## Countable Nouns

As their name suggests, countable nouns are those that refer to something that can be counted. For example, we can count cars:

- one car, two cars, three cars...

Even if the number might be extraordinarily high (like counting all the stars in the sky), countable nouns can be individually counted.

Some more examples of countable nouns:

- car, man, bottle, house, key, idea, accident
- dog, cat, animal, man, person
- cup, plate, fork
- table, chair, suitcase, bag, etc.

Concrete nouns may be countable.

- New cars are very expensive.
- I got some books from the library yesterday.

Collective nouns (words that denote a group of people or things) are countable.

- She attended three classes last week.
- This house is perfect for two families.

Even some proper nouns are countable.

- There are many Italians in New York.
- There are five Johns in the room.


## Singular and Plural

Since countable nouns can be counted, they can be singular (=one) and plural (=two or more):

| singular | plural |
| :--- | :--- |
| accident | accidents |
| banana | bananas |
| couch | couches |
| dream | dreams |
| neighbourhood neighbourhoods |  |

You probably remember that plural forms of nouns usually have the '-s' ('-es') ending. For example:

- There is an egg.
- There are four eggs.
- They've got great toys for babies here.
- We need to get some new dishes for this evening.

Learn more about how to form the plural forms here.
Note that singular verbs are used with singular countable nouns, while plural verbs are used with plural countable nouns.

- Your book is on the kitchen table.
- How many candles are on that birthday cake?


## Determiners

Countable nouns can be used with articles such as $a / a n$ and the, numbers or quantifiers such as a few, a lot and many. These words in general are called determiners because they
describe nouns, i.e. make it clear what a noun refers to. For example:

- I bought a jacket and a shirt.
- My house is near the center.
- There's a lot of flowers in the garden.
- She's got two sisters and a younger brother.

You can't use singular countable nouns alone, i.e. without a/the/my, etc.

- We can't get into the house without a key. (not key)
- I want a banana. (not banana)
- Paris is an interesting city.


## A/an

We use 'a' and 'an' with singular countable nouns when we do not need to make clear which person or thing we are talking about:

- an accident, a banana, a couch, a dream, a neighbourhood.

Learn more about using a/an with nouns here.
The
When people can understand which person or thing we mean, we use 'the' with singular and plural countable nouns:

- The pie won the prize but the judges didn't like the cookies.

Learn more about using the with nouns here.

## No Article

We use no article (the so-called 'zero article') with plural countable nouns and with uncountable nouns when we are talking in general:

- Dogs usually don't like cats.
- Good health is more important than money.

Unlike singular countable nouns, plural countable nouns can be used alone:

- I like bananas.
- Accidents can be prevented.

We can use 'some' and 'any' with plural countable nouns meaning 'a bit, a quantity of'. We use 'some' in affirmative sentences and 'any' in negative sentences and questions:

- I'd like some bananas, please.
- Did you buy any apples?

We use 'many' and 'few' with plural countable nouns.

- We didn't take many pictures.
- I have a few words to say.


## Uncountable Nouns

Uncountable nouns are seen as a whole or mass. They cannot be separated or counted and come in a state or quantity that is impossible to count. For example, we cannot count air:

- one air, two airs, three airs...

Examples of uncountable nouns include:

- abstract nouns: homework, knowledge, money, permission, research, traffic, travel
- ideas and experiences: advice, information, progress, news, luck, fun, work
- materials and substances: water, rice, cement, gold, milk
- food and drinks: juice, wine, meat, rice, bread, cheese, coffee
- weather words: weather, thunder, lightning, rain, snow
- names for groups or collections of things: furniture, equipment, rubbish, luggage

Uncountable nouns are always considered to be singular. They have no plural, even if they end in '-s'. The verb form is singular and we can use some.

- Put some sugar.
- How much wine is there?
- Your hair is really long!
- The news was a complete shock!

NOT: advices, informations, moneys, musics, waters.

Thus, uncountable nouns have always only one form:
money - the money - my money - some money - much money etc.

- I've got some money.
- There isn't much money in the box.
- Money isn't everything.

There are, however, some uncountable nouns that are plural and are followed by a plural verb. Be careful with the following words:

- clothes
- Your clean clothes are on the bed.
- jeans
- Your new jeans look great!


## Determiners

Uncountable nouns can stand alone or be used with determiners (e.g. my, her, some, any, no, the, this, that) and expressions of quantity (e.g. a lot of, (a) little, some, much):

- She's been studying hard and has made a lot of progress.
- This coffee is a bit old, I'm afraid.
- I'd like some water, please.
- There is a lot of snow on the road.
- They gave me some information about the courses.

Since uncountable nouns have no plural, we can't use ' $\boldsymbol{a}$ ' and 'an' with them:
NOT: an advice, an information, a money, a music, a water.
As we have seen, some determiners can be used with all nouns whether countable or uncountable. For example, the word 'some' can be used with both:

- I would like some crackers.
- He would like some water.

However, other determiners can only be used with countable nouns and some can only be used with uncountable nouns. For example, the article 'a' is used with singular countable
nouns and isn't used with uncountable nouns:

- I would like a sandwich.
- I would like some juice. (Not: I would like a juice.)

With uncountable nouns we use the determiners 'much' and 'little':

- There isn't much milk in the bottle.
- They have little money.


## Making Uncountable Things Countable - Quantity Expressions

Uncountable nouns can be paired with words expressing plural concept. These are words and phrases like 'a glass of', 'a bottle of' or 'a piece of' or words for containers and measures. We cannot say 'an information' or 'a music'. But we can say a 'something' of.

In short, uncountable nouns can become countable when the noun is in a container. For example:

- some sugar - a bag of sugar
- some water - a bottle of water
- some cereal - a bowl of cereal

Thus, you can’t say 'two waters' but you can say 'two bottles of water'.

- Try to drink at least eight glasses of water each day.
- I'd like a glass of water, please.
- We bought two bottles of wine.
- This is a beautiful piece of music.
- I bought you a bar of chocolate.

Note: In informal English, we can say 'a coffee', 'three waters', etc. with
the meaning 'a cup of coffee', 'three glasses/bottles of water', etc.
Sometimes uncountable nouns are used as countable, to mean 'a measure of something' or ' a type of something':

- Can I have two teas and one coffee, please? (two cups of tea and one cup of coffee ...?)
- There are some juices on the table. (different types of juice)


## Nouns That Can Be Countable and Uncountable

Sometimes, the same noun can be both countable and uncountable, often with a change of meaning. The meaning will depend of the context.

Consider the following examples:

- Our house has seven rooms. - Is there room for me to sit here? ('rooms' vs 'space')
- Have you got a paper to read? - I want to write a letter. Have you got some paper? ('magazine' vs 'paper')
- There are four lights in our bedroom. - Close the curtain. There's too much light! ('lamps' vs 'light')
- I had some interesting experiences while I was travelling. - They offered me the job because I had a lot of experience. ('things that happened to me' vs 'not experiences')

TIP: Some words that are uncountable in English may be countable in other
languages. In English these words are uncountable - that means that we can't say 'a/an' ... (a bread, an advice) and they can't be plural (advices, furnitures):
accommodation advice information
fruit homework news
transport traffic luggage
music pasta money
damage behavior weather

## How to Use Countables and Uncountables

Why is it so important to know whether a noun is countable or uncountable? That's because we use different words with countables and uncountables - see the rules below.

## Countable Nouns

## Statements

In positive sentences, we use:

A / AN + singular countable noun SOME + plural countable noun
There is a cat in the garden.
I'll have a cup of coffee.
There are some birds in the trees.
He has some great ideas.
Note: Though 'any' is mainly used in negative sentences and questions, we can use it in positive statements with the meaning 'not important which'.

- You can have any three items of clothing you like for $\$ 30$.
- They should be here any minute.


## Negatives

In negative sentences, we use:

## A / AN + singular countable noun ANY + plural countable noun

There isn't a dog in the garden.
He hasn't got a car.
There aren't any birds in the tree.
We didn't take any pictures.
See more examples:
To make pancakes...

- ... you need a frying pan.
- ... you don't need an electric mixer.
- ... you need some plates.
- ... you don't need any chopsticks.


## Questions

In questions, we use a/an, any and how many:

| A / AN + singular | ANY + | HOW MANY + plural |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| countable noun | countable noun | countable noun |
| Is there an apple on the | Are there any chairs in the | How many books are there? |
| tree? | garden? |  |

Do you have a car?

Are any of your friends here?

How many lessons will you have tomorrow?

## Uncountable Nouns

## Statements

In positive sentences, we use:

SOME + uncountable noun
I need some sugar in my coffee.
There is some milk on the floor.

## Negatives

In negative sentences, we use:

## ANY + uncountable noun

He didn't buy any apple juice.
He doesn't have any money left.

## Questions

In questions, we use any and how much:
ANY + uncountable noun HOW MUCH + uncountable noun
Is there any sugar? How much wine is there?
Do you have any luggage? How much luggage do you have?

Compare:
How many + plural countable noun How much + uncountable noun
How many eggs are there? - Six. How much milk is there? - A litre.
How many plates are there? - Four. How much flour is there? - 500 g .
LET'S SUMMARIZE:

## Quantifiers

|  | UNCOUNTABLE <br> NOUN | PLURAL <br> COUNTABLE <br> NOUN | BOTH |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :--- |
| POSITIVES | a little | a few <br> several <br> each <br> SENTENCES | some <br> a lot / lots of <br> plenty of <br> every |
| no | no |  |  |

## For example:

I've got several problems.
There isn't much milk in the fridge.
https://slideplayer.com/slide/4115666/
Note the verb forms. Singular nouns take singular verbs, while plural nouns take plural verbs:

- There is a frying pan. (singular noun)
- There aren't any eggs. (plural noun)
- There is some milk. (uncountable noun)
- There isn't any flour. (uncountable noun)


## Grammar in Action

So, how should we use expressions with countable and uncountable nouns in everyday situations?

1. We use a/an, some and any with nouns to talk or ask about the quantity of something, for example, when talking about food:

- Have you got any cheese or meat? I could make a pasta dish. - Great idea. I've got some tomatoes and a chilly pepper. We could add them, too.

2. We use a/an and some with nouns to make requests, for example, when we are at a restaurant:

- We'll have some water and some bread, please. - I'd also like a glass of orange juice.

3. We use some with nouns when we offer something, for example, to our guests:

- Would you like some toasts or some cake? - Yes, with pleasure.

Here's a good video from mmmEmglish explaining what countable and uncountable nouns are and how they are used:

See also:

Abstract and Concrete Nouns
Plural and Singular Nouns
Pronouns and Determiners: Quantifiers

