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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/an* 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 '**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. There are **some birds** in the trees.*

*I'll have **a cup of coffee**. 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. There aren't **any birds** in the tree.*

*He hasn't got **a car**. 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 countable noun

*Is there **an apple** on the tree?*

ANY + countable noun

*Are there **any chairs** in the garden?*

HOW MANY + plural countable noun

***How many books** are there?*

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? - 500g.*

LET'S SUMMARIZE:

Quantifiers

| | UNCOUNTABLE NOUN | PLURAL COUNTABLE NOUN | BOTH |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| POSITIVES SENTENCES | a little a bit of | a few several each every | some a lot / lots of plenty of no |
| NEGATIVES SENTENCES | much | many | any a lot / lots of enough |

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 mmmEnglish 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](#)