

What's in a name? More than you imagine...

English nouns can be **countable** or **uncountable**

COUNTABLE nouns have a singular and plural form
e.g. *one book / three books, one person / three people*

With countable nouns we can use *a/an* or *some*
e.g. *I've got **a book** / **some books** about ancient Egypt*

UNCOUNTABLE nouns only have one form;
e.g. *work, love, food, intelligence, water, information*.
Most are singular. Some are only plural: *groceries, customs*

Typical uncountables:

Materials / substances: *plastic, iron, wood, paper, coffee*

Abstract ideas: *life, fun, freedom, progress, health, time*

Activities: *work, travel, football, research*

Feelings: *anger, happiness, honesty, hope, respect*

WARNING – don't forget that these nouns are uncountable:

*advice, behaviour, business, cash, furniture, information,
knowledge, luggage, money, news, research, travel*

A few examples:

- *Contact your tutor for **advice** and **support***
- *We're hoping that **business** will improve this year*
- *We got the **information** we needed from the Internet*
- *There is a need for further **research** on this topic*
- *“All the **news** that's fit to print”*

Some uncountable nouns can be made countable by adding *a piece of, an item of* or *a bit of*.

E.g. *a piece of advice/information/research*
an item/piece of luggage
an item of news/a news item

Other uncountable nouns need more specific words:

a flash of lightning
a clap of thunder
a stroke of luck (also, a bit of luck)

Uncountable nouns ending in -s

Subjects of study / activities:

*economics, politics, mathematics, statistics,
electronics, physics, aerobics, aeronautics,...*

Diseases:

measles, diabetes,...

e.g.: - *Economics is the oldest of the social sciences*

- *Physics is fun*



Some nouns can be countable or uncountable

COUNTABLE meaning >>> specific

UNCOUNTABLE meaning >>> general

a business (a company)

business (in general)

a noise (specific)

noise (in general)

a painting (one object)

painting (the activity)

a coffee (a cup of coffee)

coffee (the material)

a wood (a forest)

wood (the material)

a glass (for drinking)

glass (the material)

A few examples:

- *I heard a strange noise / I can't stand noise*
- *I bought a painting / Do you like painting?*
(cf. also: *Do you like that painting?*)
- *I don't like low-alcohol beers / Beer is generally cheaper than wine*
- *Consumers worry that businesses will use the Internet to capture customer information / It's time for business to proclaim the benefits of globalisation*

Nouns after *some*, *few/little*, *many/much*, etc.

Some and *any* go with plural or uncountable nouns

E.g. *Sam told some jokes.*

Sara didn't know any jokes.

We had some fun.

Many and *few* or *a few* go only with plural nouns

E.g. *You will have many opportunities.*

I only have a few books left to read.

Much and *little* or *a little* go only with uncountable nouns

E.g. *I can't give you much help.*

There's a little bread if you're hungry.

Remember:

Few and *little* mean “not enough”

A few and *a little* mean “some”

Please translate the following into English:

1. Che notizie ci sono? L' unica notizia è che non ci sono notizie.
2. A pochi bambini piace la fisica.
3. Il delitto non paga, gli affari sì.
4. I tuoi capelli sono troppo lunghi.
5. I loro progressi sono stati sorprendenti.

1. *What's the news? The only news is (that) there is no news*
2. *Few children like physics*
3. *Crime doesn't pay. Business does.*
4. *Your hair is too long.*
5. *Their progress has been surprising.*

Articles in English - is it just *a/an* and *the* or should I know better?

English has three types of articles:

1. indefinite article: *a/an*
2. zero article
3. definite article: *the*

The indefinite article - *a/an*

Can introduce a new specific entity

e.g. *I've bought a new mobile phone...*

Can be used to mention an unspecific entity

e.g. *Tim works in a factory*

Is used to describe the job or the character of a person

e.g. *Mary works as an engineer*

Peter is a fool!

The zero article

Expresses indefinite meanings, i.e. non-specific or generic reference:

We have wine - let's drink it!

“Dogs are not allowed in this shop”

War is a terrible thing

Spanish is spoken by about 400 million people

Speaking is not permitted during the examination

Special uses of the zero article

Means of transport and communication:

travel by air/car; send by mail/e-mail

Meals:

tonight we'll go out for dinner; lunch is at 12.30

Most names of countries, states and cities +
geographical names:

she comes from France; Bristol is in the UK; Great Britain is an island; Lake Victoria is in East Africa

Times of day, months and seasons:

tomorrow at dawn; when winter comes, we'll go skiing

Places as institutions:

be in / go to hospital, prison, class, court

be at / go to work, school, university

Place names and *the*

Continents, countries, islands, states and counties

Most are without *the*. Words like *republic* and *kingdom* have *the*. Plural names have *the*.

E.g. *the Irish Republic, the United Kingdom*
 the Netherlands, the Canary Islands

Regions

Regions ending with the name of a continent or country are without *the*. Most other regions have *the*.

E.g. *Central Asia, Western Australia*
 the West, the Middle East, the South of France

Lakes, oceans, seas, rivers

Only lakes are without *the*: *near Lake Michigan, Lake Ontario*.

To make things a bit more complicated...

Dinner is at 7.30 vs.

*The dinner they serve
here is awful*

*After the conference
there was a dinner*

Spot the errors!

1. *“The animals are not permitted in this hotel”*
2. *New York is in United States of America*
3. *I’ve got a friend who is engineer.*
4. *The love makes the world go round.*
5. *Valerie wants to go to the university
and study to be doctor*

Some common nouns in legal English:

action, business, damages, evidence, firm, justice, proof, right.

Are they countable or uncountable?

Look them up in an online dictionary and study the entries and the examples provided in them.

Suggested dictionaries:

<http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>