

ARTICLES (A, AN, THE): CAN YOU COUNT IT?

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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Countable nouns refer to people, places, or things that can be counted (one dollar/two dollars, one house, two houses). They [these countable nouns] can always be made plural—usually by adding –s or some other variation of the plural ending, e.g. student(s), countri(es), child(ren). A few words are the same in both the singular and plural forms (deer, sheep).

Uncountable nouns often refer to food, beverages, substances, or abstractions (meat, tea, steel, information); *some* uncountable nouns (but not the abstract ones) can be made countable by adding a **count frame** in front of them (two *gallons* of milk, six *blocks* of ice, a *bar* of soap, a *bunch* of celery).

Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable even without adding count frames. For example, as an uncountable noun, *experience* refers to abstract knowledge or skill that can be gained by observing or participating in events. As a singular or plural countable noun (*experience/experiences*), the word *experience* refers to a particular instance (or instances) of participation in events. Similarly, the uncountable noun *glass* is a substance made from silicates; *a glass* (singular) is something you drink from; and *glasses* (plural) are frames containing lenses that correct imperfect vision.

There are other exceptions to the countable/uncountable distinction as well. Moreover, a noun that is countable in your native language may be uncountable in English, and vice-versa. For example, *soap* is countable in Spanish but uncountable in English. However, as long as you are aware of these differences they probably will not cause you much difficulty.

LEARNING HINT #1: The best thing to do is to memorize some of the most frequently occurring uncountable nouns (shown in **Table 1** below), and to look up other nouns in a dictionary if you are not sure whether they are countable or uncountable. If your dictionary does not indicate whether nouns are countable or uncountable, then you should consult another dictionary, such as *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. This dictionary is available for you to use at the Writing Center.

In the *Oxford* dictionary, nouns are countable unless they are designated by the letter [u]. If a noun can be either countable or uncountable (with different definitions, as in the examples given above), then the uncountable definitions are preceded by [u], and the countable definitions are preceded by [c], as in the following example:

ad-ven-ture n. 1 [c] a strange or unusual happening (*The explorer told the boys about his adventures in the Arctic*). 2 [u] risk; danger (*Robin Hood lived a life of adventure*).

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Table 1: Some Common Uncountable English Nouns

- **Food and Drink:** bacon, beef, beer, bread, broccoli, butter, cabbage, candy, cauliflower, celery, cereal, cheese, chicken, chocolate, coffee, corn, cream, fish, flour, fruit, ice cream, lettuce, meat, milk, oil, pasta, rice, salt, spinach, sugar, tea, water, wine, and yogurt
- **Nonfood Substances:** air, cement, coal, dirt, gasoline, gold, ice, leather, paper, petroleum, plastic, rain, rubber, silver, snow, soap, steel, wood and wool.
- **Abstract nouns:** advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, employment, fun, happiness, health, honesty, information, intelligence, knowledge, love, poverty, satisfaction, truth, and wealth
- **Others:** biology, clothing, equipment, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, lumber, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, traffic, transportation, violence, weather, and work