

## Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Nouns in English can be broadly divided into **countable** and **uncountable**. Understanding whether a noun is countable or uncountable affects your choice of article (*a/an, the*) or quantifier (*some, much, few, etc.*) and also your choice of the singular or plural verb form.

### General rules:

**Uncountable nouns** are simply things that we usually cannot count. They are used with a singular verb form and are referred to using singular pronouns. Abstract nouns, like “maturity,” are uncountable, as are some concrete nouns, such as water, snow, or oil

**Countable nouns**, on the other hand, can be counted. They are things that exist as individual units. They may be concrete nouns like “trees,” collective nouns like “teams” or some proper nouns (names), like “Europeans.”

### Common mistakes:

Some nouns can be ‘counted’ in many languages, but are uncountable in English, often leading to errors, e.g. research, evidence, equipment, news, progress, knowledge, information, advice:

*The evidence suggests no relationship between the two variables.*

*The relevant research on the subject is limited.*

To ‘count’ these nouns, they need to be modified with phrases such as “a piece of”:

*How can these two pieces of evidence be combined?*

**Some nouns can be either countable or uncountable**, depending on the context. This usually happens when an abstract noun is used to refer to something specific and concrete, or the other way around. *Technology, behavior, work, cost, theory, and life* are all nouns that can be abstract (and therefore uncountable) or concrete (and therefore countable):

Uncountable use	Countable use
<i>Extensive <u>theory</u> has been drawn upon.</i>	<i>Einstein’s <u>theories</u> were a starting point for...</i>
<i>The gains came at considerable <u>cost</u>.</i>	<i>The project <u>costs</u> are skyrocketing.</i>

Unlike strictly uncountable terms, these terms may describe either a broad, abstract meaning, or a more specific one. You can refer to Einstein’s theories specifically, or to a body of theory generally.

### A note on quantifiers:

A quantifier is a specific adjective used before a noun to indicate an amount. Most quantifiers can be used for both uncountable and countable nouns, but there are a few differences.

Uncountable—answers “how much?”	Countable—answers “how many?”
<i>Much <u>progress</u> was made.</i> <i>There is little <u>evidence</u> to suggest a connection.</i>	<p>much, little</p> <p>many, several, few</p> <i>I had <u>many experiences</u> there.</i> <i>Few <u>studies</u> investigate this topic.</i>
<i>Some <u>medical advice</u> was given.</i> <i>No <u>news</u> has been reported.</i>	<p>all, most, a lot of, not a lot of, some, any, no, enough</p> <i>Some <u>changes</u> are necessary.</i> <i>No <u>subjects</u> were tested.</i>

Category	Always uncountable	Explanation	Example sentence	Sometimes countable	Explanation (specific)	Example sentence
<b>States of being</b>	happiness, pride, sadness, anger, envy, exhaustion, jealousy, enjoyment, failure, understanding	You can have more than one feeling, but you cannot have more than one of the same feeling.	<i>My success in analytics is a point of <u>pride</u>.</i>  <i>Thank you for your <u>understanding</u>.</i>	love, pleasure, freedom, failure	These act as objects referring to specific experiences.	<i>Ice skating is one of her many <u>pleasures/loves/failures</u>.</i>  <i>The <u>freedoms</u> of today were not possible in the past.</i>
<b>Fields of study</b>	engineering, medicine, technology (most ending in -ology), employment, genetics, forestry, education	Fields of work encompass several different specific fields within them, and are therefore singular.	<i>This led me to the field of <u>medicine</u>.</i>  <i>I have enjoyed <u>biology</u> since I was a child.</i>	science, technology, math, art	These fields are known to include more specific studies.	<i>I study the <u>sciences/arts</u>.</i>  <i>I study <u>maths</u>. (British)</i>  <i>I study <u>math</u>. (American)</i>
<b>Concepts</b>	knowledge, love, peace, education, advice, information, justice, independence, cooperation	General ideas and concepts are not physical objects, and therefore can't be counted.	<i>My <u>education</u> prepared me for this position.</i>  <i>I received <u>advice</u> from my mentor on this topic.</i>	experience, development, life, death, intelligence	These act as objects referring to specific components.	<i>We shared many <u>experiences</u> on our travels together.</i>  <i>People today need to have multiple <u>intelligences</u>.</i>
<b>Technical terms</b>	research, evidence, equipment, news, progress	These refer to general categorical objects that act as concepts.	<i>The <u>evidence</u> suggests no relationship between the two variables.</i>	technology, behavior, work, cost, theory	These refer to several specific components collectively.	<i>The <u>technologies</u> developed so far are inadequate.</i>  <i>The <u>costs</u> are skyrocketing.</i>
<b>Volumes and materials</b>	water, milk, oil, gravel, time, timber, carbon, iron, , money, anthracite, gold	These are general masses without standard units.	<i>We measured the time it took the <u>water</u> to reach the designated level.</i>	Words that can be used to modify volumes: glass, atom, deposit, specific measurement		<i>Silver <u>deposits</u> run deep into the mountain.</i>

### Tips:

- When looking up a new word, check for a 'C' for countable or 'U' for uncountable in its dictionary entry.
- For help using the right article with nouns of all kinds, see the Articles handout.
- Think of the process of making a cake. Before you put cake batter in the oven, it's a runny substance that can't be divided into parts. Once baked, it's solid enough to be cut into pieces. Uncountable nouns are like cake batter; countable nouns are like pieces of cake! (Thanks to the Purdue Online Writing Lab for this nice little analogy!)
- For more countable and uncountable nouns, see <https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/nouns-uncountable-list-ab.htm>.