

Count vs. Noncount Nouns

Before you can form plurals correctly, you need to understand the difference between *count* and *non-count* nouns. *Noncount nouns* are a large group of “mass” or “collective” nouns that do not make a distinction between singular and plural forms. Even though these nouns may refer to large quantities of things, they act like singular nouns grammatically:

- 1) They can never take the plural ending “s”
- 2) They always take a singular verb.
- 3) They cannot be used with the indefinite article “a/an” (whose original meaning was “one”), and are frequently used with no article at all.
- 4) They are used with collective quantity words like “a lot of,” “some,” “any,” “much,” or “more,” instead of count words like “many,” “several,” “two,” or “few.”

The following categories of words frequently contain *noncount* nouns:

Abstractions: Beauty, revenge, knowledge, progress, poverty Example: *Ignorance* causes *poverty*.

Liquids and gases: Water, beer, air, gasoline, milk Example: *Gas* is cheaper than *oil*.
Wine is my favorite beverage.

Materials: Gold, silver, wood, glass, sand. Example: He had a will made of *iron*. *Gold* is more valuable than *silver*.

Categories of food: Rice, flour, cheese, salt, yogurt. Example: *Bread* is the staff of life.
Meat and *cheese* are sources of protein.

Languages: French, English, Korean. Example: *Navajo* is a complex language. Do you speak *German*?

BUT use “the French,” “the English” when referring to people of a given nationality:
Example: *The French* **are** great lovers of wine. (Note that this noun is plural.)

Academic fields: physics, astronomy, music. Example: *Philosophy* is a difficult subject.
My brother is majoring in *biology*.

Sports and games: tennis, golf, basketball. Example: Do you play *chess*? *Soccer* is becoming more popular in America.

Weather: Fog, snow, wind. Example: Severe *drought* can cause famine. The city of Buffalo gets more *snow* than most cities in New York State.

Natural phenomena: gravity, nuclear energy, magnetism. Example: *Electricity* is a form of *energy*. Newton discovered the principles of *gravity*.

Gerunds (verbal nouns): running, singing, smoking. Example: *Swimming* is excellent exercise. *Sleeping* during class is not recommended.

Groups of things of varying size and shape: jewelry, garbage, luggage, equipment.
Example: Fine *jewelry* is expensive. *Trash* was thrown everywhere in the room.

If noncount nouns cannot take plural endings, how do you denote a specific number or quantity of noncount nouns?

- Use count nouns such as “piece,” “ton,” “cup,” etc.:
“Two *bottles* of wine,” “Five *pieces* of equipment” (NEVER equipments!).
Note that these count nouns take a plural verb:
“*Ten pieces* of jewelry **were** stolen.”
(Other examples: “five research papers,” “several interesting pieces of information,” “six cans of beer,” “a pound of butter.”)
- For general quantities, use general quantity words such as those listed on the previous page (e.g., more, much, a lot of, less, a large quantity of):
:
“We need to do *more research* (NEVER researches!)”
“A *lot of* valuable *information* **is** contained in this paper (NEVER informations!).”
Note that the verb used with *information* is singular.

Use of the definite article “the” with noncount nouns:

As soon as you specify a noncount noun by attaching a defining phrase to it, you must use “the,” just as you would with any other noun. Note the difference between:

“Information is a valuable commodity.” vs
“*The information that you gave me* was valuable.”

When you are talking about a particular piece of information, as opposed to information in general, a definite article is needed. Note that even abstract nouns may be used in a specific way, as in:

“The beauty *of the night* was overwhelming.” or
“The poverty *of the old man* was tragic.”

Use of s with noncount nouns:

Certain noncount nouns, especially foods and liquids, may be used with a plural “s”—just like count nouns—when they refer to many different varieties (e.g. “many poisonous gases,” “various cheeses”). Note the difference:

“He drank too much *wine*.” vs
“*The wines* of France are famous.”

(For more information on definite and indefinite articles, see the handout “**Definite and Indefinite Articles**.”)