

Countable And Uncountable Nouns

What is a noun?

Everything you see around is a noun! (desk, computer, phone, car). Nouns are therefore objects and things. But they can also be non-physical things like ideas.

A noun is a word that names:

Things: Table, chair, water.

People: Mark, Jane, pilot, driver.

Animals: Dog, cat.

Places: London, kitchen, country.

Concepts, ideas or feelings: Examples: love, hate, jealousy, information.

In English grammar, nouns divided into 2 categories or types:

1) Countable nouns

2) Uncountable nouns

Why do we divide nouns into these 2 groups? Why is it important to know if a noun is countable or uncountable? It is important because English grammar rules are different for countable and uncountable nouns.

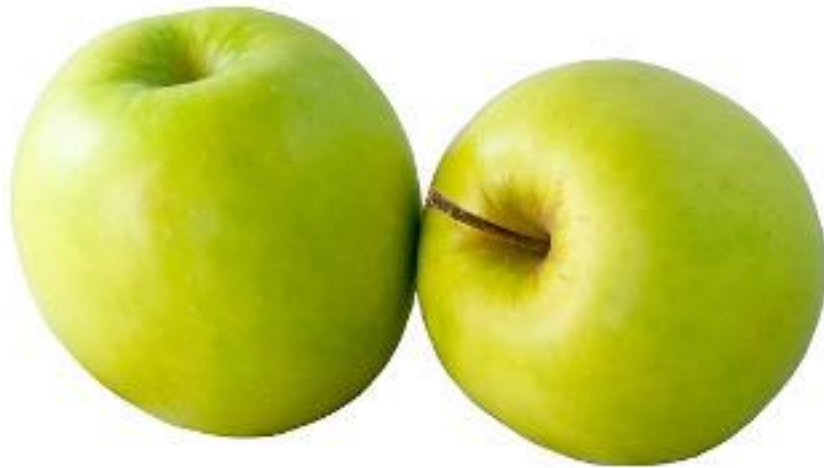
1.Countable nouns

A countable noun is a separate object. It is a separate unit. We can clearly count the number of units of a countable noun. An example is “apple”. A countable noun has a singular form (when there is one unit).

Example: I have one apple.



It also has a plural form (where there is more than 1 unit) For regular nouns, we usually form the plural by adding “s” – Example: I have two apples.




We can count countable nouns because it is clear to see they are separate units.

In the singular form, we can use the indefinite article (“a” / “an”). **Example:** I am eating an apple.


2. Uncountable nouns

An uncountable noun is not a separate object or unit. We cannot count uncountable nouns. It is a large solid mass or liquid without clear boundaries. An example is “water” We cannot count water. We do NOT say “I have 3 waters” – It does not make sense. Water is a liquid and is just one big amount all together.

Uncountable nouns only have a singular form.


Example: I have some water. 

There is no plural form for uncountable nouns. I have some waters. 


We cannot use the indefinite article (“a” / “an”) **Example:** I have a water. 

Uncountable nouns are therefore names of materials, gases, liquids, concepts, collections, mass objects without boundaries.


Examples:


-The pasta is very nice. 

(Notice that “pasta” is in the singular form. The verb “is” (third person singular of the verb “be”) is also the singular form to agree with the subject.

-The pastas are very nice. 

(This is wrong because pasta does not have a plural form!)

-Can I have some pasta? 

-He served me some pasta. 

(Pasta is singular)

Examples of uncountable nouns:

Sugar, butter, oxygen, rice, pasta, salt, bread, milk, water , advice, air, alcohol, blood, butter, cheese, coffee, education, flour, food, furniture, grass, ice, information, luggage, meat, milk, money, music, news, oxygen, paper, pepper, rain, rice, salt, sand, snow, sugar, toothpaste, wine, wood and many more.

As you can see, “advice”, “information” and “news” are all uncountable in English. And do NOT have a plural form. “news” has a letter “s” on the end, but it is in fact singular.

Here are some examples showing the correct and incorrect versions:

-He gave me some good advice. ✓

-He gave me some good advices. ✗

-Can I have some information? ✓

-Can I have an information? ✗

-The news is good ✓

-The news are good. ✗

3. Some Nouns Are Both Countable And Uncountable

Some nouns can be considered as either countable or uncountable. It depends on the situation and context.

Example with the noun “chocolate”

Situation 1 – Imagine a box of chocolates.



Box of chocolates

There are lots of separate chocolates inside the box. They are individual entities. We can count them. “chocolate” in this context is countable.

So we say:

-Do you want a chocolate?

-I ate three chocolates. They were delicious.

Situation 2 – A bar of chocolate.



Bar of chocolate

It is a mass of chocolate. Not separate. We cannot count this. “chocolate” in this context is uncountable.

So we say:

- “Do you want some chocolate?”

- “I ate some chocolate.”

4. Using A Countable Unit with An Uncountable Noun

Sometimes, we can use a “countable unit” with an uncountable noun. It is a way of sort of dividing up the uncountable noun. We can then put the countable unit in its plural form to express an amount of the uncountable noun.

Example: “water”

Water is an uncountable noun because it is a liquid. We cannot count water. We say: Do you want some water? However, we can use a “countable unit” such as “glass” to divide up the water, so we say “Do you want a glass of water?”



Glass of water

Please understand that “water” is still an uncountable noun. That has not changed. But we are able to use the countable units (glass, jug, litre) to express a quantity of that water.

Other examples of this:

- Bowl of rice
- Slice of bread
- Piece of cheese

5. SOME And ANY – Determiners

SOME and ANY are determiners. We use them before a noun. They express the amount or quantity of a noun. SOME and ANY are used differently for **countable and uncountable nouns**, therefore it is important to understand the difference.

1. SOME

The meaning of SOME is an unknown (or unstated) amount or quantity of something (a noun). We use SOME in three types of sentence / structure:

1. Affirmative sentences

- **Countable Nouns**

We use SOME before a countable noun in the plural form to describe more than one unit of the countable noun.



Example situation 1: Imagine that there are 3 pears on the table. Perhaps the exact number of pears is not important. We do not need or want to state the number specifically. We therefore say: “There are **some** pears on the table.”

Example situation 2: Imagine that there are 34 pears in the cupboard. We do not actually know that the exact number is 34 because there are too many to count and it’s not important anyway. We can say “There are **some** pears in the cupboard.”

Since the countable noun is in the plural (pears), the linking verb “be” is in the plural form also (“are” – third person plural)

▪ **Uncountable nouns**

SOME before an uncountable noun in an affirmative sentence describes an unknown or unspecified amount. Remember that an uncountable noun is a mass of something without clear boundaries, a gas or liquid. It cannot be counted.

The uncountable noun is always in the singular form.

Examples:



There is **some** pasta.

There is **some** water.

There is **some** rice.

The linking verb “be” is in the singular form also (“is” – third person singular.)

2. Questions to ask for something

We can use SOME in questions to ask for something. We are asking to receive something or to be given something. The form is slightly different for countable and uncountable nouns as follows:

▪ **Countable Nouns**

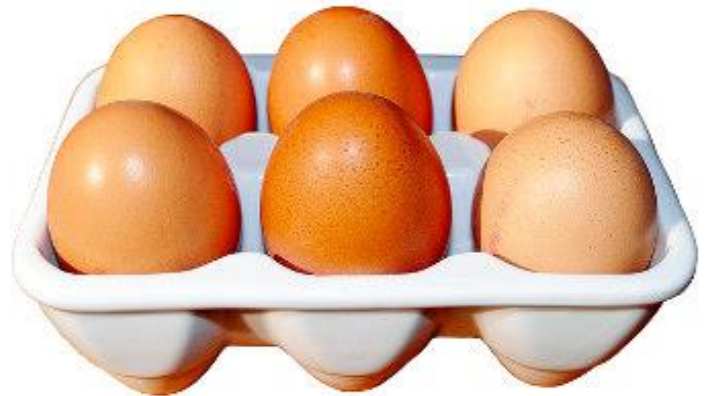
The noun is always in the plural form.

Examples:

Can I have **some** eggs?

Can I have **some** apples please?

Could you give me **some** oranges?



▪ **Uncountable Nouns**

The noun is always in the singular form.

Examples:

Can I have **some** bread?

Could you give me **some** help?

(“help” is uncountable in English!)



3. Questions to offer something

We can use SOME in questions to offer something to someone. We are asking if the person wants something. The form is different depending on if the noun is countable or uncountable.

- **Countable Nouns**

The noun is always in the plural form.

Examples:



Do you want **some** grapes?

Would you like **some** cherries?

- **Uncountable Nouns**

The noun is always in the singular form:

Examples:

Would you like **some** soup?

Do you want **some** cake?



2. ANY

The meaning of ANY is an unknown (or unstated) amount or quantity of something (a noun).

We use ANY in two types of sentence / structure:

1. Questions asking about the existence of something

▪ **Countable Nouns**

The noun is in the plural form.

Examples:



Do you have **any** books?

Are there **any** cars in the car park?

▪ **Uncountable nouns**

The noun is in the singular form.

Examples:



Do you have **any** cheese?

Is there **any** juice in the bottle?

Notice that we say “is there” (singular) and not “are there” (plural)

2. Negative sentences

We use ANY in negative sentences to mean “even the smallest amount or quantity of something.” We do not use “some” in this way.

Countable nouns

The noun must go in the plural form.

I don't want **any** books.

He doesn't have **any** shoes.

Uncountable nouns

The noun is always singular

I don't want **any** cheese.

She doesn't want **any** advice.