



Categories of nouns

Nouns describe people, places or things. They also express a range of meanings such as concepts, qualities, organisations, communities, sensations and events.

What do they look like?

- A small proportion of nouns have identifiable 'noun endings'. These include: *Tradition, ability, excellence, significance, factor, rigour.*
- Many plural nouns end in 's', e.g. cats

Proper Nouns and Capital Letters

- Words which ***begin with capital letters*** but are ***not always at the beginning of sentences*** are ***often the names of people, places (town, countries, etc.) or institutions.***
- These are called ***proper nouns.***

Examples

Lauren and Jack, Africa, International House

- A capital letter is also used for ***days of the week, months of the year,*** and the ***names of nationalities, ethnic groups and languages.***

Examples

Tuesday, August, Swahili

Where do nouns come in sentences?

- Nouns can:
 - act as the subject of a verb:

Example

Cats kill mice

- act as the object of a verb:

Example

Cats kill ***mice***

- act as the complement of a verb:

Example

They are *men*

- They often end a phrase which begins with an article such as **a**, **an** or a quantifier such as **either**, **any**, or **many**.
- They also often follow adjectives:

Examples

A *drunk*

either *way*

a much older *elite*

larger *mice*

Adjective

Adjective

Countable and Uncountable Nouns

- Countable or 'unit' nouns [C] have a singular and a plural form, e.g. book → books.
- Uncountable or 'mass' nouns [U] have only one form, e.g. furniture.

| [C] | | [U] |
|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Singular | Plural | |
| another <i>biscuit</i> | three <i>apples</i> | not much <i>success</i> |

- The distinction between countable and uncountable is based on whether or not we can count what the noun describes.
- Nouns which describe separate and separable objects are usually countable (book, computer).
- Nouns which describe liquids, materials, substances and abstract qualities are characteristically uncountable (milk, success).

Closely related countable and uncountable nouns

- Some uncountable nouns have a countable equivalent which is a different word.
- These countable nouns usually describe something more limited or defined.

Examples

Work [U]: job [C]

travel [U]: journey [C]



- The things some uncountable nouns describe can be ‘broken up’ into countable components.

| [U] | [C] |
|-----------|-------------------------|
| money | pounds, dollars, yen |
| time | hours, minutes, seconds |
| furniture | table, chair, desk |

- With some uncountable nouns, particular words are used to itemise or count what they describe.

Examples

three **blades** of grass

an **item** of news

Nouns which can be countable as well as uncountable

- Some nouns are countable with one meaning and uncountable with a different meaning.

Examples

We got lost in a **wood** [C]

Wood burns more easily than coal [U]

- Sometimes countable and uncountable forms represent two closely connected uses of one word.

Examples

I told her a few **truths** about herself [C]

We will never learn the **truth** [U]

- Some nouns that were originally plural and are becoming uncountable.

Examples

the **data** are → the **data** is

the **media** are → the **media** is

- We can use a lot of generally uncountable nouns as countable nouns.

| | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A kind/type of something | a new French cheese | a fresh orange juice |
| A quantity/unit of something | a beer | two sugars |



Activity

Look at the nouns in the two boxes below:

| | |
|---|--|
| fish, exposure, meat, steak, breast, lamb | Unhappiness, dissatisfaction, society, life, understanding, misunderstanding, soil |
|---|--|

- 1) For each noun decide whether it is:
 - a. generally countable [C]
 - b. generally uncountable [U]
 - c. both

- 2) Read the text below and underline all the nouns. Identify which are
 - a. used here as countable nouns
 - b. used here as uncountable nouns

Most therapists believe that the unhappiness over which patients come to therapy is not socially caused, but is self-created, that the patients are at least partially responsible for the dissatisfaction that is felt. The therapist will often state that he or she is not in a position to alter society, to change a patient's past, or to intervene in the life of the patient. What the therapist claims to offer is understanding. But implicit in this offer is the belief that the understanding is an internal one, and understanding of what the patient has brought to the situation to create unhappiness or at least to intensify it. Here we have a rich soil for creating deep and lasting misunderstandings, and even greater misery.

Answers are on the next page



Answers

| Generally countable | Generally uncountable | Both |
|---------------------|--|---|
| breast | unhappiness, dissatisfaction, understanding, soil, meat | society, life, fish, exposure, lamb, steak, misunderstanding |

| Countable nouns | Uncountable nouns |
|--|---|
| therapists, patients, therapist, position, patient, past, life, patient, therapist, offer, belief, understanding 9x 2), patient, situation, soil, misunderstandings | unhappiness, therapy, dissatisfaction, society, understanding, unhappiness, misery |

References

Adapted from Parrott, M. (2010). *Grammar for English language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.