



More on using nouns

Words which come before and after countable and uncountable nouns

- Whether a noun is singular (countable), plural (countable) or uncountable determines among other factors which words we use before and after it.

Before the noun	[C] Singular	[C] Plural	[U]
Indefinite articles (a, an)	a book	-	-
Numbers	one book	two people	-
certain quantifiers	each/either book	Both/many people	Much/a little interest

After the noun	[C] Singular	[C] Plural	[U]
Singular verb forms	a child/has	-	information is
Plural verb forms	-	Insects are	-

Note: Choosing a singular or plural verb form according to the kind of noun which precedes it is an aspect of agreement. It is sometimes confusing for students that plural nouns end in 's' and that singular verbs also end in 's'.

Regular and Irregular Plural Forms

- Regular forms**
 - Most countable nouns have a plural form that ends in 's'.
- Irregular forms**
 - Many irregular plural forms involve a change in vowel.

Example

man → men tooth → teeth foot → feet

- Some nouns have the same singular and plural forms.

Example

a sheep → two sheep a series → two series



- A few irregular plural forms are very different from the singular form. The most common example is **person** → **people**.
- Nouns which have been absorbed into English from other languages sometimes keep their original plural form.

Example

plateau → plateaux cherub → cherubim mafioso → mafiosi

- A few words can be treated as either uncountable or plural.

Example

Politics **is** about people.
Nobody knows what her politics **are**.

- A few words can only be in a plural form.

Example

Arms (in the military sense) arrears clothes

- The standard plural form of some words is coming into use as singular.

Example

a criteria a phenomena

Quantifying Phrases

- We use 'a number/range/variety of' before plural nouns to express something about quantity or diversity.

Example

a variety of issues

- If the expression is **followed by a verb**, this is also often in a **plural form**.

Example

A wide range of people **were** invited.

- Some people prefer to use a singular form of the verb, particularly in formal written English.

Example

A variety of issues **was** raised.

- Phrases which specify **a container or grouping** are usually followed by a **singular verb**.

Example

A bunch of flowers **is** like a kiss.

A (small/large etc.) amount of...

- We use this phrase only before uncountable nouns.
- We usually qualify amount with an adjective such as **large** or **considerable**.
- Phrases including **amount** are followed by singular verbs.

Example

the right **amount** of pasta.

A (small/large etc.) quantity/proportion/majority of...

- We can use these phrases before uncountable or plural nouns.
- We usually qualify **quantity** with an adjective such as **large** or **considerable**.

A pair of...

- Some nouns which **exist only in plural form** can be qualified by **a pair of**.

Example

a pair of trousers/scissors/glasses

Collective Nouns

- Collective nouns are words which represent groups of people (e.g. the **team**, the Conservative **Party**).
- These nouns are singular in that we can talk about (e.g. an awful government, a big staff).
- Some people believe that these nouns should always be followed by singular verb forms and that singular pronouns should be used.

Example

the staff **was** happy. the team won **its** first match.

singular verb singular pronoun

- Many people, however, use plural verb forms and pronouns.

Example

The management team **want** to make **themselves** more accessible.

plural verb plural pronoun

- People sometimes choose **either singular or plural verb forms** according to whether they are **thinking in terms of a unified 'body'** or of the various people who make it up.

Example

The army provides **an** excellent career.
The army **are** investigating the incident.

- The names or initials of many organisations also function like collective nouns.

Example

Coca Cola **are** rapidly expanding.
The UN **are** sending in peace-keeping troops.

References

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