

Count and Non-Count Nouns

“Count” and “non-count” refer to different kinds of nouns. Count nouns stand for things of which there can be more than one: beings which can be conceived as individuals, or objects with a definite shape or individual identity. Non-count nouns stand for things or ideas which are thought of in the mass or as a single entity. Count nouns have a plural form, while non-count nouns do not. Some nouns are count nouns in one sense and non-count nouns in another (“Let them eat cake” means cake in general; “I baked a cake” means on specific cake.)

Here is a summary of the differences in usage between count and non-count nouns:

Count Nouns

have singular and plural forms

take singular or plural verbs,
depending on their form

can have *a*, *an* or *one* before them
in the singular

can have *many* or *few* before them
in the plural

can have *some* (meaning *several*)
before them only in the plural

can have *a number of* before them
in the plural (but not *amount of*)

Non-Count Nouns

have only singular form

take only singular verbs

cannot have *a*, *an* or *one* before them

can have *much* or *little* before them

can have *some* (meaning *a quantity of*)
before them

can have *amount of* before them

Here are some groups of count and non-count nouns:

Count Nouns

- Names of living beings and their parts:
a man a child a horse a toad an ant
a lily a carrot a face an eye a leg
- Objects with a definite shape or definite boundary:
a desk a car a book a house a city
- Units of measurement or groups by which beings or things are subdivided:
a piece a drop a gram a cupful a litre
a flock [of geese] a herd [of elephants] a lot
a family a class a nation
- Abstract nouns of which there can be more than one:
an idea a subject a problem a reward

Non-Count Nouns

- Names of substances or materials, including food thought of in the mass:
water air smoke gold cotton wood
coffee flour butter salt earth dust
- Abstract nouns thought of as general concepts or qualities:
truth strength health pride care heaviness
education patriotism
- Names for groups of similar items making up “wholes,” often called “collective nouns”:
luggage furniture traffic equipment money
- Languages:
English French Chinese
- Fields of study:
philosophy history literature chemistry poetry
mathematics physics [these last examples are plural in form but singular in usage]
- Sports, games, activities:
soccer basketball chess hockey
- Nouns ending in *ing* [gerunds]
reading sailing thinking

Note: The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (available in the Library or the Writing Centre) labels nouns as “countable” or “uncountable”.