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Nouns, Articles, and Plurals

Nouns name people, places, things, and ideas: *teacher*, *city*, *water*, *happiness*. Almost every English sentence is built around nouns, so we begin here.

1.1 Countable and uncountable nouns

English divides nouns into two great families, and this division controls which articles, determiners, and verb forms you can use with them.

Countable nouns name things you can count. They have a singular and a plural form: *one book, two books*; *a child, three children*.

Uncountable (mass) nouns name substances, materials, and abstract ideas that English treats as an undivided mass: *water, rice, music, information, advice, furniture*. They have no plural and take a singular verb: *This information* ***is*** *useful.*

Key Point

Uncountable nouns never take *a/an* and never add *-s*. To count them, use a measure word: *a glass of water*, *a piece of advice*, *two items of furniture*, *a slice of bread*.

Common Error

Some nouns that are countable in other languages are uncountable in English. Learn these as a set:

Wrong	Right
✗ *an advice, advices*	✓ *some advice, a piece of advice*
✗ *informations*	✓ *information, a piece of information*
✗ *furnitures*	✓ *furniture, items of furniture*
✗ *luggages / baggages*	✓ *luggage, a piece of luggage*
✗ *a news, newses*	✓ *news, an item of news*
✗ *evidences*	✓ *evidence, a piece of evidence*
✗ *researches (usually)*	✓ *research, research studies*
✗ *homeworks*	✓ *homework, homework assignments*

Usage Note

Many nouns can be *both* countable and uncountable with different meanings: *I'd like* ***a coffee*** (= a cup of coffee) vs. ***Coffee*** *is grown in Brazil* (= the substance); *a paper* (= a newspaper or an academic article) vs. *paper* (= the material); *an experience* (= an event) vs. *experience* (= accumulated knowledge).

1.2 Regular and irregular plurals

1.2.1 Regular spelling rules

Rule	Examples	Notes
Add *-s*	*cat* → *cats*, *table* → *tables*	the default
After *-s*, *-ss*, *-sh*, *-ch*, *-x*, *-z*: add *-es*	*bus* → *buses*, *watch* → *watches*, *box* → *boxes*	adds a syllable: /ɪz/
Consonant + *-y*: change to *-ies*	*city* → *cities*, *baby* → *babies*	but vowel + *y*: *day* → *days*
Many nouns in *-f*/*-fe*: change to *-ves*	*leaf* → *leaves*, *knife* → *knives*, *wife* → *wives*	but *roofs*, *beliefs*, *chiefs*, *cliffs*
Some nouns in *-o*: add *-es*	*potato* → *potatoes*, *hero* → *heroes*	but *photos*, *pianos*, *radios*, *videos*

1.2.2 Irregular plurals

man → *men*	*woman* → *women*	*child* → *children*	*person* → *people*
foot → *feet*	*tooth* → *teeth*	*goose* → *geese*	*mouse* → *mice*
ox → *oxen*	*sheep* → *sheep*	*deer* → *deer*	*fish* → *fish*

Learned and borrowed words often keep foreign plurals, at least in formal writing: *analysis* → *analyses*, *crisis* → *crises*, *criterion* → *criteria*, *phenomenon* → *phenomena*, *datum* → *data*, *medium* → *media*, *stimulus* → *stimuli*, *appendix* → *appendices*.

Usage Note

Data is historically a plural (*the data **are** clear*), and formal scientific writing often keeps it plural. In general and business English, singular *data* (*the data **is** clear*) is now standard and unremarkable. Choose one pattern and be consistent.

1.3 The articles: *a*, *an*, and *the*

Articles are the most frequent words in English, and among the hardest to master. The system rests on two questions: Is the noun *specific and identifiable* to the listener? Is it *countable singular*?

1.3.1 The indefinite article *a/an*

Use *a/an* with singular countable nouns when the listener does not yet know which one you mean, or when which one does not matter:

- First mention: *I saw **a** dog in the park. **The** dog was chasing **a** ball.*
- Classifying / describing: *She is **a** doctor. This is **an** excellent idea.*
- Meaning "any one": *Could you pass me **a** pen?*
- In measurements: *twice **a** week, 60 km **an** hour, two dollars **a** kilo.*

Key Point

Choose *a* or *an* by *sound*, not spelling. Use *an* before a vowel *sound*: *an apple, an hour, an MBA, an honest man*. Use *a* before a consonant sound: *a house, a university, a European, a one-way street* (*university* begins with the sound /j/, *one* with /w/).

1.3.2 The definite article *the*

Use *the* when both speaker and listener can identify the exact referent:

- Already mentioned: *I bought a laptop and a phone.* ***The*** *laptop was expensive.*
- Unique in context: ***the*** *sun,* ***the*** *kitchen,* ***the*** *manager* (of our office), ***the*** *government*.
- Defined by a following phrase: ***the*** *book that you lent me,* ***the*** *capital of France*.
- With superlatives and ordinals: ***the*** *best,* ***the*** *first,* ***the*** *only one*.
- With some classes of proper names: rivers, seas, mountain ranges, deserts, and plural countries (*the Thames, the Pacific, the Alps, the Sahara, the Netherlands, the United States*), plus hotels, cinemas, newspapers (*the Hilton, the Times*).

1.3.3 Zero article

Use no article (the **zero article**) with:

- Plural and uncountable nouns used generally: *Dogs are loyal. Water boils at 100 °C. I love music.*
- Most proper names: *Maria lives in Tokyo, in Japan.*
- Meals, languages, academic subjects, sports: *have breakfast, speak French, study physics, play tennis.*
- Institutions used for their purpose: *go to school / to bed / to work / to hospital* (BrE), *be in prison, at church*. Compare: *The parents went to* ***the*** *school to meet the teacher* (the building, not the institution).

Common Error

- ✗ *The life is short.* → ✓ *Life is short.* (general abstract nouns take no article)
- ✗ *I like the dogs.* (meaning dogs in general) → ✓ *I like dogs.*
- ✗ *She is teacher.* → ✓ *She is a teacher.* (professions need *a/an*)
- ✗ *He is in the hospital since Monday.* (BrE, as a patient) → ✓ *He has been in hospital since Monday.* (AmE keeps *the*: *in the hospital*)

1.4 Possession: *'s* and *of*

- Add *'s* to singular nouns and irregular plurals: *the girl's bike, the children's room, James's office* (or *James' office* — both are acceptable; be consistent).
- Add only an apostrophe to regular plurals: *the girls' bikes, my parents' house*.
- Prefer *'s* for people, animals, organizations, and time expressions: *Anna's idea, the company's results, today's news, two weeks' holiday*.
- Prefer *of* for things and abstract relations: *the leg of the table, the end of the film, the cost of living*.

Exercises

Exercise 1.1 Countable or uncountable?

Decide whether the noun in bold is used countably (C) or uncountably (U).

1. Could I have two **coffees**, please?
2. **Experience** is the best teacher.

3. She gave me some excellent **advice**.
4. We need to buy new **furniture**.
5. I read an interesting **paper** on climate change.
6. There isn't much **news** today.

Exercise 1.2 Articles

Fill each gap with *a*, *an*, *the*, or — (no article).

1. My sister is _____ engineer; she works for _____ European company.
2. _____ honesty is _____ best policy.
3. We flew over _____ Alps on our way to _____ Italy.
4. I had _____ breakfast at _____ hotel near _____ station.
5. _____ water in this bottle tastes strange.
6. He goes to _____ work by _____ bus.

Exercise 1.3 Plurals and possessives

Correct the error in each sentence.

1. The childrens' toys were all over the floor.
2. I have three sister-in-laws.
3. These phenomenons are difficult to explain.
4. We bought two breads and some milks.
5. My parent's house is near the sea. (both parents)