

Count and Noncount Nouns

A noun is a person, place, thing, or idea. However, nouns can be separated into two categories: count and noncount.

- Count nouns refer to a singular entity.

Examples: *tree, car, book, airplane, fork, wall, desk, shirt*

- Noncount nouns refer to either an undifferentiated mass or an abstract idea that, as the name implies, cannot be counted.

Examples: *wood, sugar, justice, purity, milk, water, furniture, joy, mail, news, luggage*

Differentiating between Count and Noncount Nouns

There are several ways to differentiate between the two classes of nouns.

- While both types of nouns can be designated by the definite article *the*, only count nouns can be used with the indefinite article *a*.

Examples: You can say both *a car* and *the car*, but you can only say *the sugar*, not *a sugar*.

- Only count nouns can be plural.

Examples: You can say *roads, groups, and guitars*, but you cannot say *milks, mails, or furnitures*.

- A few nouns can be used as either count or noncount. *Wood*, as a building or burning material, is a noncount noun. As such, the clause “the monastery was built of *woods*” doesn’t make sense. But when the word refers to forest(s), it is a count noun.
- Count nouns can also combine with certain determiners, such as *one, two, these, several, many, or few*. Determiners are words that precede nouns. Some describe the quantity of a noun (like those above), while others describe whether a noun is specific or not.
- On the other hand, noncount nouns combine only with other determiners, such as *this, some, most, all*. However, count nouns can be used with *this, some, most, and all* as well.
- Count nouns will almost always be combined with a determiner, whereas noncount nouns will commonly be used without any determiners.

Measuring Noncount Nouns

As the name suggests, most noncount nouns cannot be physically counted.

We cannot separate *water*, *wine*, or *juice* into their separate parts, but we can define them using other measurements.

Examples: seven deciliters of wine, eight hundred grams of water, four hundred milliliters of juice

Note the usage: We can quantify a noncount noun by combining it with a count noun (using the preposition *of*).

Using Fewer and Less

The words *fewer* and *less* are commonly misused in the English language. Their usage depends on whether the modified noun is count or noncount.

- Always use *fewer* with count nouns.

Examples: There are *fewer* students in the class than last week. One serving contains *fewer* than 100 calories.

- Despite what you might see at the checkout counter (*10 Items or Less!*), *less* should only be used to modify noncount nouns.

Examples: Our nation must use *less* coal and crude oil. John has *less* hate in his heart than he did ten years ago.

Activity 1

Determine whether the underlined noun is count or noncount. Consider the clues you are using to determine the correct answer.

1. My lunch box contained approximately 23 carrots.
2. The gasoline mixture contained precisely 4 liters of water.
3. The evidence is clear, and the criminal will be prosecuted.
4. The band is going to play a show in Portland tonight.
5. In these types of situations, it is good to have a friend.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. count
2. noncount
3. noncount
4. count
5. count

Activity 2

Determine whether to use *fewer* or *less* with the following nouns.

1. You have **fewer/less** than ten days to complete the assignment.
2. There are no **fewer/less** than 5 gallons of milk left on the shelf.
3. There's **fewer/less** respect in the world since I was a kid.
4. When I talk to him, I feel **fewer/less** pity than I did before.
5. Buy any five items for **fewer/less** than 100 dollars!

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. fewer
2. fewer
3. less
4. less
5. fewer