

Count and Noncount Nouns

Nouns can be separated into two basic 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, coal

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*.
 - Example: You can say both *a car* and *the car*, but you can only say *the sugar*, and not *a sugar*.
- Only count nouns can be plural.
 - Examples: roads, groups, guitars; but not milks, mails, furnitures.
 - Note that a few nouns can be used as either count or noncount. Wood, as a building or burning material, is a noncount noun (the clause “the monastery was built of woods” doesn’t make any 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, few*.
 - Note: 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*.
 - Note that 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.

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: eight bottles of wine, three gallons of water, a glass of juice.
 - Note the usage: we can quantify a noncount by combining it with a count noun (using the preposition *of*).

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.

Practice

Determine whether the noun in the blank is countable or uncountable. What are the cues you're using to determine your answer?

1. My lunch box contained approximately 23 _____.
2. The gasoline mixture contained precisely 4 liters of _____.
3. _____ is a new substance that can be used to cleanse contaminated water.
4. The _____ are going to play a show in Portland tonight.
5. In these types of situations, it is good to have a _____.

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. A limited time offer! Buy any five items for **fewer/less** than 100 dollars!

Key for Practice Section 1: 1. Count 2. Noncount 3. Noncount 4. Count 5. Count

Key for Practice Section 2: 1. fewer 2. fewer 3. less 4. less 5. fewer

Works Consulted:
Kolln & Funk. *Understanding English Grammar*. 7th ed.