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