

Sample Minilesson: Noun Plurals

Discovery Activity: Read through the paragraph below and complete three tasks: (1) highlight all of the nouns; (2) identify if the noun is singular or plural form; (3) explain how you know it is singular/plural and why it is singular/plural in that specific usage.

Maryland Parents Forget Child, 3, at Chuck E Cheese, Find Out on TV News¹

Parents of a 3-year-old girl had some explaining to do after they forgot their daughter at a Chuck E Cheese and did not realize it until they saw her picture on the evening news.

The girl, named Harmony, was left behind at the theme restaurant in Bel Air, Md., after she attended a large party with her parents. According to a report from the Harford County Sheriff's Office, both of Harmony's parents, who share custody, assumed the girl had gone home with other relatives.

A restaurant manager alerted sheriff's deputies around 8 p.m. that the girl had been left alone after Harmony approached a staff member to say she was thirsty.

Unable to locate the 3-year-old girl's parents, the deputies asked local news media to put Harmony's picture on the evening news.

Shortly after Harmony's picture showed up on the 11 p.m. newscast, multiple phone calls came into the Sheriff's Office, including calls from the girl's parents. After police determined that Harmony's abandonment was inadvertent, Child Protective Services released her to her mother, and no charges are expected to be filed.

Calls to the Harford County Sheriff's Office from ABC News were not immediately returned.

Type of Nouns

Contrast 1: Common vs. Proper Nouns:

Proper nouns are names of specific individuals or places and are capitalized. They can also include titles of important documents such as *the Constitution* or entities such as *the Supreme Court*.

John McCain ran for president.

Alabama has been hit by terrible tornadoes this past year.

¹ Source: ABC news online blog, March 12, 2012.

<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/03/parents-forget-girl-3-at-chuck-e-cheese-find-out-on-evening-news/>.

Common nouns include all other nouns, and are not capitalized.

Contrast 2: Concrete vs. Abstract Nouns:

Concrete nouns: can be seen (or heard, smelled, tasted, etc.): *book, coffee*
Abstract nouns: ideas or concepts: *honesty, communism*

Contrast 3: Singular vs. Collective Nouns: (army, committee, group, government, etc.). Collective nouns refer to a group of individual things or people. Examples include words such as *faculty, audience, or equipment*.

Contrast 4: Countable & Uncountable Nouns:

Countable nouns have singular and plural forms. They are called “countable nouns” because they can be *counted*. If you have *students* in a classroom, *books* on a shelf, *cookies* in a jar, or *sheep* in a pasture, in each case you can count how many there are: *one student, two students...*

One important note is that some countable nouns have “zero-plural,” meaning that the plural and singular forms are the same. *Sheep* is an example.

Uncountable nouns cannot be made plural: *furniture, homework, research, water, rice*. [Note that these are different from the “zero-plural” nouns we just discussed. “Zero-plural” nouns have no specific plural ending form, but they can still be plural (as to usage in a sentence) and are still considered countable nouns.]

Here are a couple of simple tests you can use to tell countable and uncountable nouns apart:

Chart 1: Comparing Countable & Uncountable Nouns

Characteristic/Question	Count Noun (“dog”)	Uncountable Noun (“sand”)
Can it take a plural form?	Dogs	no plural: *sands
Can it be preceded by an indefinite article (a/an)?	a dog	no indefinite article: *a sand
Which “quantity” determiners would you use with it (many vs. much; few vs. less)?	many dogs; few dogs	much sand; less sand

Some nouns may fall into either category, depending upon how they’re used in a particular sentence:

Practice Exercise: Researching Countable & Uncountable Nouns

The nouns in the chart below are examples of problematic or challenging nouns in English. Look up each noun in an online or print dictionary. First use a learner dictionary, such as the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Then compare what you found with a dictionary designed for English native speakers. Finally, compose or copy a sentence you found that uses that noun correctly, noticing whether it's treated as countable or uncountable, singular or plural, in the sentence. The first one is done for you as an example.

Noun to Analyze	Learner Dictionary Information ²	Native Speaker Dictionary Information ³	Sample Sentence
Equipment	uncountable noun	none ⁴	the equipment for new hospital is expensive. (collective noun used with singular verb)
Information			
University			
Hypothesis			
Happiness			
Religion			

Noun Plurals: Issues and Problems

Now that we have discussed the different noun subcategories, you probably have a better idea of how and why noun plurals can be hard to master and use correctly in writing. In this section, we discuss specific writing problems that may be caused by the complexities with English nouns.

Issue 1: Countable/Uncountable Nouns and Plurals. In the previous section, we saw that the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns is important. Here is the basic rule: *Countable nouns can be made plural, but uncountable nouns cannot.* This rule seems easy enough, but there are some instances where things can get more complicated. Here is the basic distinction:

² For this example, the online *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* was used.

³ For this example, the online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* was consulted.

⁴ However, there is a link in the entry to “information for English learners”; if you follow the link, you see that the noun is identified as “noncount.”

There are two **chairs** and a couch in the living room.
There are three ***furnitures** in the living room.

Chair is a countable noun, and as you can see in the first sentence, it can be made plural by adding an “-s” when referring to more than one of them. In contrast, *furniture* is an uncountable noun, and thus you cannot pluralize it (which is why there is an asterisk before the noun form in the second sentence).

Similarly, consider these two examples:

I like two ?*sugars* in my coffee.
I ordered three ?*coffees* for us already.

Some nouns are used both ways—as countable and noncountable—depending upon the sentence context. Look again at these examples from the previous section:

Too much **beer** will make you fat.
I really love to eat **chocolate**.

Both of the nouns in these sentences are uncountable. But it would be possible to take the same sentences and use countable nouns:

Too many **beers** will make you fat.
I really love to eat **chocolates**.

Issue 2: Irregular Plural Forms. Once you have decided whether a particular noun can be made plural at all (Issue 1), the next step is to understand what its plural form might be. Somewhat similar to simple past tense for English verbs, nouns in English may have either regular or irregular forms.

The *regular* English plural form involves adding an –s suffix (*boys, trees, houses*, etc.) with some variation for spelling (*city* → *cities*, *dish* → *dishes*). There are many different irregular noun plural forms as well (*man* → *men*, *child* → *children*, *phenomenon* → *phenomena*, *stimulus* → *stimuli*, etc.). If you are unsure of the plural form of a noun, just look it up in a dictionary; dictionaries for both native speakers and learners will include this information.

As mentioned previously, one of the most irregular plural forms is the “zero-plural,” not to be confused with uncountable nouns:

My **goldfish** is floating at the top of his bowl.
My **goldfish** are floating at the top of their bowl.

Fish (or *goldfish*) is an example of a zero-plural noun, but it is also a countable noun. The sentence context (verbs and pronouns agreeing with the noun subject) makes it

clear in the above examples which sentence is talking about just one goldfish and which is discussing more than one.

Issue 3: Proper Nouns: Singulars and Plurals. Proper nouns, as we discussed earlier, are names/titles of people or places (or entities such as *Congress*) and are capitalized. They have set singular or plural forms that do not change:

President Obama is visiting **Los Angeles** this week.

The United States has trade partnerships with **the Netherlands**.

In the first sentence, the bolded proper noun phrases refer to a specific person or place and are singular. Although the noun “president” can be made plural (as in “There have been 44 *presidents* in U.S. history”), when the word is attached to the name of a specific president, it becomes a proper noun, is capitalized, and cannot be made plural in that form.

In the second sentence, the *United States* is the name of a country that consists of a collection of individual states. It is always plural and cannot be made singular (the *United *State*), and the same holds true for *the Netherlands*.

Application Activity: For this activity, use a paper you are working on now or have recently completed. Were there any errors in noun plural usage? Go through the paper (at least the first page, but more if you have time), mark every noun you used, and ask yourself:

- (a) Is this noun countable or uncountable?
- (b) If it is countable, did I intend it as a plural?
- (c) If I intended it as a plural, did I use the correct plural form?
- (d) If it is uncountable, did I incorrectly mark it as a plural noun? What should the correct form be?

Where you are not sure of the answers to these questions, look them up in an online or print English learner dictionary.

Final Reflection: Now that you have reviewed the material on noun plurals, where do you think or sources of error might be in your own writing? For example, are you confused about the countable/uncountable distinction? Are you unsure of the plural forms of some nouns? Does the proper/common noun distinction ever cause you problems? Having reflected upon this, what do you think is the best strategy for editing your writing going forward: Consulting a dictionary while you are writing or editing, editing finished text more carefully, noting how plurals are used in texts you read, or some other idea?