

Common Errors Series No. 2 - Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Countable nouns represent things and concepts that we regard as separate units with definite boundaries. In the singular, countable nouns must be preceded by an article or quantifier:

She gave birth to *a boy*. *The boy* was named Peter.

But in the plural this is not obligatory:
Both her children are *boys*. *Boys* are often troublesome.

Uncountable nouns represent objects and concepts that we regard as whole or impossible to divide, e.g. *advice*, *water*, *smoke* and *soup*. Words which represent a whole class of similar objects, such as *equipment*, *cutlery* and *furniture*, are also regarded as uncountable.

Uncountable nouns have no plural form and cannot take an indefinite article. But they can take a definite article or a quantifier:

Soup is delicious and nutritious.
The soup your mother made is delicious.
There's *some soup* in the pan.

Some uncountable nouns can in fact be treated as both countable and uncountable depending on the contexts in which they are used — for example, *coffee*, *soup* and *beer* in the context of division into cups, bowls and bottles:

Two *cups of* coffee, please.
Three *bowls of* soup, please.
Four *bottles of* beer, please.

Other common examples are:
He ate six *slices of* bread for breakfast.
That's an interesting *piece of* news.
There were several *drops of* water in the glass.
There are several *types/kinds of* pollution in big cities.

Common uncountable nouns

Note that the nouns in the box below are almost never used in a plural form or with *a(n)* but some take a partitive e.g. He gave me a useful *piece of* advice.

advice, apparatus, behaviour, clothing, dirt, equipment, fiction, fun, furniture, guidance, hardware, harm, homework, housework, information, knowledge, laughter, luggage, men's wear, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, software, stationery, traffic, welfare, work

Activity 1

Identify and correct the error in each sentence.

1. I had difficulty finding enough informations to finish the project.
2. It was a hard work to finish the project on time.
3. The company builds special machineries for making roads.
4. The new office equipments are based on the most modern designs available.
5. Tourists are attracted by the beautiful sceneries here.
6. Thanks you for your many useful advices.
7. This is a good news for all of us.
8. We plan to give each staff a pay rise if sales increase.
9. Try to learn at least ten new vocabularies a week.
10. You shouldn't take so many heavy luggages.

Nouns used in the plural

Some nouns are nearly always used only in the plural, as the examples in the table show.

Incorrect	Correct	Compare (correct)
Later he grew used to his new <u>surrounding</u> .	Later he grew used to his new <u>surroundings</u> .	He is used to his new <u>environment</u> .
The working <u>condition</u> was dangerous.	The working <u>conditions</u> were dangerous.	Although not old, it is in a dangerous <u>condition</u> .
He gave all his <u>earning</u> to his wife.	He gave all his <u>earnings</u> to his wife.	He gave all his <u>salary</u> to his wife.
The <u>headquarter</u> is in New York.	The <u>headquarters</u> are in New York.	The <u>head office</u> is in New York.
He can't see without his <u>glass</u> .	He can't see without his <u>glasses</u> .	Please give me a <u>glass</u> of water.

Activity 2

Fill the gaps in the right-hand column of the table to create correct sentences.

Incorrect	Correct
1. The manager gave each staff a bonus.	The manager gave each _____ a bonus.
2. I learned 10 new alphabets today.	I learned 10 new _____ today.
3. Only 50 audiences attended.	There were only 50 people _____.
4. They learned 8 new vocabularies in the lesson.	They learned 8 _____ in the lesson.
5. The <u>punctuations</u> are all wrong.	The _____ are all wrong.
6. The traffic condition is dangerous today.	The traffic _____ dangerous today.
7. Office workers respond well to an attractive surrounding.	Office workers respond well to attractive _____.
8. The headquarter of HSBC is in Hong Kong.	The _____ in Hong Kong.
9. The office stationeries are kept in a locked cabinet.	The office _____ kept in a locked cabinet.
10. There are several pollutions in big cities.	There are several _____ in big cities.