

# ELL/ESL: COUNT & NON-COUNT NOUNS

**Count Nouns** are singular or plural nouns that can be counted, including people, places, and things. Picture the noun in your head, and determine if you can count that noun without having to quantify it first. (For instance, “butter” is a non-count noun because you’d have to say “3 sticks of butter” in order to count it, rather than just saying “3 butter.”) **All singular count nouns** must have some form of **determiner** before them.

**Singular Count Noun Examples:** a house, a book, my cousin, one reason)

**Plural Count Noun Examples:** some houses, ten books, my cousins, several reasons)

**Non-Count Nouns** are nouns that cannot be counted. These include categories such as food, liquids, ideas, nature, and even certain group nouns.

**Non-Count Noun Examples:** butter, meat, coffee, oil, peace, wisdom, rain, thunder, advice, traffic

Determinants are words (such as the, a, each, some, which, this, and six) that are most used with nouns to specify their purpose.

We sometimes use non-count words in a countable sense out of convenience. Such as asking for *two coffees* when you mean *two cups of coffee*, or for *two sugars* when you mean *two packets of sugar*.

## SPECIAL RULES

1. **There are a few words that can be either count or non-count, depending on the meaning.**
  - a. Ex: “*I like chickens*” refers to a count noun (i.e., the animal).
  - b. Ex: “*I like chicken*” refers to a non-count noun (i.e., the meat).
2. **While it may not be possible to count non-count nouns, it is sometimes necessary to quantify them.**
  - a. Ex: A cup of sugar, a bowl or rice, a slice of cake, a teaspoon of salt, or a glass of milk.
  - b. Ex: A piece of jewelry, a piece of furniture, a piece of wisdom, or a piece of (your, his, etc.) mind.
3. **Use many with plural count nouns and much with non-count nouns. When in doubt, it is always correct to use a lot of with both count and non-count nouns.**
  - a. Count: Many books, a lot of books
  - b. Non-Count: Much money, a lot of money

## EXAMPLES

Here are a few examples of count nouns followed by their applications.

Categories of Count Nouns		
Determiner	Determiner + Noun	Determiner + Descriptive Adjective + Noun
Article	A cat	A black cat
Demonstrative Adjective	That book	That interesting book
Number	One reason	One specific reason
Possessive	My class	My worst class
Quantifier	Each problem	Each serious problem

Here are a few examples of non-count words.

Categories of Non-Count Nouns	
<b>Foods</b>	Butter, bread, cheese, chocolate, fish, flour, fruit, macaroni, meat, mustard, pasta, pepper, rice, salt, soup, spaghetti, spinach, sugar
<b>Liquids</b>	Coffee, cream, juice, milk, oil, tea, water
<b>Ideas</b>	Honesty, importance, intelligence, peace, wisdom
<b>Nature</b>	Lightning, rain, scenery, ice, snow, sunlight, thunder
<b>Group Nouns</b>	Advice, cash, clothing, equipment, fruit, furniture, hair, homework, information, luggage, makeup, money, news, research, traffic, vocabulary

**Being able to tell the difference between count and non-count nouns is crucial to the legibility of your paper. Mastering them is key to writing clear, professional essays.**

This information comes from the chapter “Key 5: Count & Non-Count Nouns” in *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: A Practical Handbook*, by Keith S. Folse.

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