

# Countable and uncountable nouns

50.

**A** Nouns can be either **countable** or **uncountable**. Countable nouns are those which can have the word **a/an** before them or be used in the plural. Uncountable nouns are not used with **a/an** or in the plural. This sentence includes countable nouns in bold:

• We've got **three children**, **two cats**, and **a dog**.

This sentence includes uncountable nouns in bold:

• It was good to get out into the countryside and breathe in some fresh air.

**B** Some nouns in English are normally uncountable; in many other languages they are countable:

• There's always lots of housework to do. • Her jewellery must have cost a fortune.

Here are some more nouns like this: accommodation, advice, applause, assistance, baggage, camping, cash, chaos, chess, clothing, conduct, courage, cutlery, dancing, dirt, employment, equipment, evidence, fun, furniture, harm, health, homework, housing, information, leisure, litter, luck, luggage, machinery, money, mud, music, news, nonsense, parking, pay, permission, photography, poetry, pollution, produce, progress, publicity, research, rubbish, safety, scenery, shopping, sightseeing, sunshine, transport, underwear, violence, weather, work.

**C** Sometimes a noun is used uncountably when we are talking about the whole substance or idea, but countably when we are talking about

■ recognised containers for things. Compare:

• I prefer tea to coffee, *and* • Three teas (= cups of tea), please.

■ a type, brand or make of thing. Compare:

• There's cheese in the fridge. *and* • There were dozens of cheeses (= kinds of cheese) to choose from.

■ a particular example of a physical or concrete thing. Compare:

• She has blonde hair. *and* • There's a hair in my soup!

■ a particular instance of a substance or an idea. Compare:

• The statue was made of stone. *and* • I had a stone in my shoe.

• She was always good at sport. *and* • Football is mainly a winter sport in Britain.

There are many nouns like this, including beer, coffee, water; fruit, shampoo, toothpaste, washing powder; cake, chicken, land; noise, rain, snow, sound, space, stone; abuse, (dis)agreement, business, conversation, difficulty, dislike, fear, improvement, language, life, pain, pleasure, protest, success, thought, war.

**D** Some nouns have different meanings when they are used countably and uncountably. Compare:

• Bolivia is one of the world's largest producers of tin (= the metal) *and*

• The cupboard was full of tins. (= metal food containers)

Other nouns like this include accommodation, competition, glass, grammar, iron, jam, lace, paper, property, room, sight, speech, time, work.

**E** Some nouns that are usually used uncountably can be used countably, but only in the *singular*, including education, importance, knowledge, resistance, traffic:

• She has an extensive knowledge of property prices in this area.

• The decision to build the bridge later took on an unexpected strategic importance.

The noun **damage** can be used countably, but only in the *plural*:

• Sue is claiming damages (= money paid as compensation) for the injuries caused.

Determiners and quantifiers ⇒ **Indefinite**

## EXERCISES

UNIT  
50

- 50.1 Choose two of the words below as the most likely ways of completing each sentence. For one answer you will need to make the word plural, and for the other you will need to make no change. (B)

accommodation bag equipment house jewellery job luggage  
painting shower sunshine tool work

- 1 On the weather forecast they said there would be ..... this afternoon.
- 2 The waiting room was so full of people and their ....., there was nowhere to sit.
- 3 Repairing car engines is easy if you've got the right .....
- 4 In Stockholm at the moment there's a fascinating exhibition of ..... from 19th century Sweden.
- 5 Both my brothers are looking for .....
- 6 The price of ..... has increased by 12% this year alone.

- 50.2 Choose from the words below to complete each sentence. Decide if the word should be countable or uncountable. If the word is countable, add a/an or make it plural as appropriate. (C)

chicken dislike improvement language life success

- 1 Mary used to keep ..... in her garden until they started to get out.
- 2 A score of 40% may not be very good but it's certainly ..... on her last mark.
- 3 After so many previous ....., it was inevitable that one of his films would be unpopular.
- 4 ..... is too short to worry about keeping your house spotlessly clean.
- 5 I've had ..... of green vegetables ever since I was a child.
- 6 Our students study both ..... and literature in their English degree.

- 50.3 Choose from the words below to complete each pair of sentences. Use the same word in (a) and (b). Decide if the word should be countable or uncountable. If the word is countable, add a/an at an appropriate point in the sentence or make it plural. (D & E)

damage education traffic paper resistance speech

- 1 a I had to go through <sup>a</sup> very strict and traditional education.....  
b ..... has been hit once again in the government's spending cuts.
- 2 a ..... was building up on the motorway as the fog got thicker.  
b Since the war, illegal ..... in weapons has grown.
- 3 a Outnumbered by at least three to one, he knew that ..... was useless.  
b After a while we seemed to build up ..... to mosquitoes.
- 4 a The judge awarded Mr Sinclair ..... of nearly £50,000.  
b The accident caused some ..... to my car but it wasn't worth getting it repaired.
- 5 a Muriel gave ..... at the conference on the psychological effects of divorce.  
b The use of recycled ..... is saving thousands of trees from being cut down each year.
- 6 a It is said to be ..... that distinguishes us from the other animals.  
b We had to listen to some long and boring ..... after the meal.