Uncountable Nouns

tea
Section 1

Introduction

What is an uncountable noun?

An uncountable noun cannot be counted.

For example, we can count cars, but we cannot count water. Water is a substance.

Notice that ‘sugar’ is an uncountable noun. We can count lumps of sugar, but not sugar in general.

Note that ‘people’ is a countable noun. Even though there is no -s ending, we can count people (3 people, 4 people etc).

*Note - Countable nouns are sometimes called count nouns and uncountable nouns are sometimes called non-count nouns.

Examples of Countable Nouns:

car          table
book         noun
person       day
phone        cookie
cat          kid
Examples of Countable Nouns:

Uncountable nouns are often types of food, materials or abstract concepts.

salt
sugar
information
work
wool

weather
butter
oil
advice
pepper

oxygen
milk
luck
meat
honesty

patience
knowledge
homework
happiness
honey

Exercise 1

Which of these words are uncountable?

Tick the words that are uncountable. Answers are on page 13.

1 □ methane
2 □ advice
3 □ smoke
4 □ wool
5 □ meat
6 □ shoe
7 □ target
8 □ chocolate
9 □ mustard
10 □ mouse
11 □ finger
12 □ battery
13 □ kid
14 □ pasta
15 □ cellphone

Do you need more practice? Try many more exercises at http://www.roadtogrammar.com/uncountablenouns
Section 2

Amounts and Quantities

Let’s review some rules:

1 We do not use numbers with uncountable nouns.

   Wrong:    He told me three informations.
   Right:    He told me three pieces of information.

2 We do not add -s to uncountable nouns.

   Wrong:    These informations is wrong.
   Right:    This information is wrong.

3 We treat an uncountable noun as a singular verb:

   Wrong:    these information
   Right:    this information

   Wrong:    Your information are correct.
   Right:    Your information is correct.

4 We can use ‘some’ and ‘any’ with both uncountable and countable nouns:

   He gave me some information.
   He gave me some apples.

5 With countable nouns, we use ‘few’ and ‘a few’. With uncountable nouns, we use ‘little’ and ‘a little’:

   I ate a few apples.
   I ate a little cheese.

6 Because ‘a’ means ‘one’, with uncountable nouns, we can use ‘the’, but not ‘a’:

   Correct:    The bread from that shop is tasty.
   Wrong:     I bought a bread from that shop.
7 With uncountable nouns, we cannot use ‘many’, but we can use ‘lots of’, ‘a lot of’ and ‘much’:

Wrong: They bake many bread in that shop.
Right: They bake a lot of bread in that shop.
Right: They bake lots of bread in that shop.
Right: Do they bake much bread in that shop?

8 We can use ‘more’ with uncountable nouns:

Would you like some more water?

Exercise 2
Are the following sentences grammatically correct? If not, try to think of a way to correct them.

1. Can you pass a salt?
2. Could you pass the salt?
3. This sugar is lovely.
4. Can you pass me a meat?
5. I have so many homeworks to do.
6. Most of this information are correct.
7. Do you have any information that would be useful?
8. My work is difficult.
9. These jam looks tasty.
10. This pasta taste great!
11. Can I borrow a little wool from you?
12. We’re having some great weather at the moment.
13. Add lots of oil to the pan.
14. I only have a few money left.
15. Henry gave me a useful advice.
16. My sister doesn’t give me much advice.

Section 3
Difficult and Special Cases

Let’s review some words that can be especially confusing:

Furniture (uncountable)

Furniture may seem like a countable noun, but it is uncountable.

Furniture always refers to a group of objects.

We bought some furniture for our new apartment.
**Equipment** (uncountable)

Like furniture, equipment always refers to a group of items. It is uncountable.

We bought some new equipment for our factory.

**Luggage** (uncountable)

Like furniture, luggage always refers to a group of items (a group of bags or suitcases). It is uncountable. Baggage is also uncountable.

He brought plenty of luggage with him.

**Jewelry** (uncountable)

Jewelry is another group noun.

- Correct: I have a lot of jewelry
- Wrong: I have a lot of jewelries.

**Traffic** (uncountable)

Traffic is a group noun.

There was so much traffic on the road this morning!

**Fruit** (uncountable)

Fruit refers to a group of items (pieces of fruit). It is uncountable.

Strawberry, banana, apple etc are all countable nouns.

- I ate some fruit.
- I ate some bananas.

**News** (uncountable)

News is an uncountable noun even though it is spelled with an -s:

- Correct: We have some good news.
- Wrong: We have a good news.

**Coffee** (uncountable and sometimes countable)

Strictly speaking, coffee is an uncountable noun:
I like to drink coffee.

However, when ordering in a café or restaurant, it is used as a countable noun:

Could I have three coffees, please?

Words for other drinks, such as tea, wine and beer are used in the same way.

**Paper** (countable or uncountable, depending on the meaning)

Usually paper is uncountable:

Could I have some paper?
I need three sheets of paper.

When the meaning is ‘report’, it is countable:

Dr Kaki has published a paper on Global Warming.

**Money** (uncountable)

Money is uncountable. However, units of money (dollars, euros) are often countable:

Could I borrow some money?
Could I borrow three dollars?

Other units of currency are countable, but do not take a plural -s (meaning that they are irregular plurals):

It cost me 200 yen.
The price is fifty lira.

’Cash’ is uncountable

**Chicken** (countable or uncountable, depending on the meaning)

The word chicken is countable when it refers to the animal, but uncountable when it refers to the food.

The farmer has over three hundred chickens.
Would you like some more chicken?
Software (uncountable)

Software is uncountable, ‘program’ is countable, as is ‘application’.

   We need to purchase some software.
   We need to purchase some computer programs.
   We need to purchase some applications.

Like software, hardware is uncountable.

Work (uncountable or countable, depending on the meaning)

Work, homework and housework are all uncountable.

   I have some work to do.
   I have some homework to do.

   I have several tasks to do.
   I have several assignments to do.

   There is another meaning of work, as in ‘work of art’. This meaning of work is countable:

   Several works of art were stolen from the museum.

Time (uncountable or countable, depending on the meaning)

Time, in general is uncountable:

   I don’t have much time.

Time, when it means ‘occasion’, is countable:

   How many times have you watched that movie?

Hair (uncountable or countable, depending on the meaning)

When referring to strands (pieces) of hair, the word is countable, but hair is usually a group word, referring to all the individual hairs on a person’s head.

   She has beautiful hair.
   There’s a hair in my salad!
Fish (countable or uncountable, depending on the meaning)

When ‘fish’ describes the food, it is always uncountable:

We ate some delicious fish.

To describe the living creature, this word is countable but is usually spelled without -es:

There were three fish in the pond.
There were three fishes in the pond. (correct, but less common)

Section 4

Adding –s to Uncountable Nouns

Adding –s changes the meaning

We know that ‘food’ is an uncountable noun. Yet you may sometimes see the word ‘foods’.

For example, on a shop sign: Harry’s Fine Foods

In this case, ‘foods’ = kinds of food

We can use most uncountable nouns in this way:

  Coffees = kind of coffee
  Teas = kinds of tea

Many teas are imported from Sri Lanka

  Meats = kinds of meat

Meats that are low in cholesterol include chicken and turkey.

Even though ‘people’ is not an uncountable noun, it follows this rule:

  Peoples = kinds of people

The peoples of the South Pacific include islanders from Fiji, Kiribati and Samoa.
**Exercise 3**

This exercise will test you on the previous two points:

- **Difficult and special cases**
- **Adding -s to uncountable nouns**

**Circle the correct options:**

Can you help me to move the ________?    furnitures  furniture  
We bought some new ________ for the factory.   equipments  equipment  
She wears a lot of _________.    jewelry  jewelries  
She wears a lot of _________.    rings  ring  
This car cost a lot of _________.    moneys  money  
The price was ten thousand _________.    dollars  dollar  
The ________ so bad that I didn’t get home until eight.  traffics were  
There were too many slow-moving ________ on the road.  vehicles  vehicle  
I love eating _________.    fruits  fruit  
I love eating _________.    banana  bananas  
I have ________ good news to tell you!    a  some  
We have had ________ good news recently.  a lot of  many  
How ________ luggage did you bring?  much  many  
How ________ did you bring?  much bag  many bags  
I’d like to order a couple of ________, please.  coffees  coffee

**Section 5**

**Container Words**

We often make nouns countable by using them together with ‘container words’.

For example, we can’t say ‘two soaps’ but we can say ‘two bars of soap’.

The most common container word is ‘piece’; for instance, ‘a piece of news’.

Some uncountable nouns can be used with more than one container word:

- A cup of coffee
- A jar of coffee.
More examples.

A slice of cheese.  A grain of sand.  A piece of news.
A bar of chocolate.  A member of staff.  A piece of luck.
A pinch of salt.  A herd of cattle.
A tube of toothpaste.

Exercise 4
Complete the phrases without looking back at the notes:

1. a _______ of cheese
2. a _______ of grass
3. a _______ of advice
4. a _______ of bread
5. a _______ of jewelry
6. a _______ of news
7. a _______ of sand
8. a _______ of toast
9. a _______ of chocolate
10. a _______ of staff

Exercise 5
Final exercise

Circle the correct option:

1. Which of these words is countable?  
   chair  furniture
2. Which of these words is countable?  
   equipment  machine
3. Which of these words is countable?  
   rice  cookie
4. Can you pass me a _______ of paper?
   sheet  slice
5. I have so _______ homework to do.
   much  many
6. Have you made _______ progress?
   many  any
7. I need _______ advice.
   an  some
8. Is ______ milk fresh?
   this these
9. Most of this food ______ tasty.
   is are
10. Let’s order a couple of ______ and have a chat.
    coffees coffee
11. I bought some chewing ______.
    gums gum
12. I don’t have enough ______ to finish this assignment.
    time times
13. I enjoyed all the ______ we went dancing together.
    time times
14. Which of these words is uncountable?
    garbage can
15. Which of these words is uncountable?
    flour flower
16. A ______ of cheese.
    bar slice
17. A ______ of soap.
    slice bar
18. I have ______ good news to tell you.
    some a
19. I can lend you ______ money if you need it.
    a few a little
20. I can lend you ______ dollars if you need some money.
    a little a few
Section 6

Answer key

Exercise 1

Which of these words are uncountable?

Words in bold are uncountable:

1  □ methane  
2  □ advice  
3  □ smoke  
4  □ wool  
5  □ meat  
6  □ shoe  
7  □ target  
8  □ chocolate  
9  □ mustard  
10  □ mouse  
11  □ finger  
12  □ battery  
13  □ kid  
14  □ pasta  
15  □ cellphone

Exercise 2

Sentences in bold are correct:

1 Can you pass a salt?    (…the salt)
2 Could you pass the salt?
3 This sugar is lovely.
4 Can you pass me a meat?   (…the meat/some meat)
5 I have so many homeworks to do.   (homework)
6 Most of this information are correct.  (… is correct)
7 Do you have any information that would be useful?
8 My work is difficult.
9 These jam looks tasty.    (This jam…)
10 This pasta taste great!    (tastes)
11 Can I borrow a little wool from you?
12 We’re having some great weather at the moment.
13 Add lots of oil to the pan.
14 I only have a few money left.   (…a little money)
15 Henry gave me a useful advice.  (...some useful advice)
16 My sister doesn’t give me much advice.
Exercise 3

Answers are in bold:

Can you help me to move the _________?    furniture s  f
We bought some new _________ for the factory.   equ ipments
g她 wears a lot of _________.
She wears a lot of _________.
This car cost a lot of _________.
The price was ten thousand _________.
The _________ so bad that I didn’t get home until eight.
There were too many slow-moving _________ on the road.
I love eating _________.
I love eating _________.
I have _________ good news to tell you!
We have had _________ good news recently.
How _________ luggage did you bring?
How _________ did you bring?
I’d like to order a couple of _________, please.

Exercise 4

Complete the phrases:

1 a _______ of cheese     slice/piece/lump
2 a _______ of grass      blade
3 a _______ of advice     piece/bit/word
4 a _______ of bread      slice/piece/loaf
5 a _______ of jewelry    piece
6 a _______ of news       piece/bit
7 a _______ of sand       grain
8 a _______ of toast      slice/piece/bit
9 a _______ of chocolate  bar/piece
10 a _______ of staff     member
Exercise 5

1. Which of these words is countable? chair
2. Which of these words is countable? machine
3. Which of these words is countable? cookie
4. Can you pass me a ______ of paper? sheet
5. I have so ______ homework to do. much
6. Have you made ______ progress? any
7. I need ______ advice. some
8. Is ______ milk fresh? this
9. Most of this food ______ tasty. is
10. Let’s order a couple of ______ and have a chat. coffees
11. I bought some chewing ______. gum
12. I don’t have enough ______ to finish this assignment. time
13. I enjoyed all the ______ we went dancing together. times
14. Which of these words is uncountable? garbage
15. Which of these words is uncountable? flour
16. A ______ of cheese. slice
17. A ______ of soap. bar
18. I have ______ good news to tell you. some
19. I can lend you ______ money if you need it. a little
20. I can lend you ______ dollars if you need some money. a few