1 Nouns

cat cats elite
capacity dustbin steak
people Wednesday

Key considerations

Most learners are more concerned with the meaning of nouns than with their grammar. However, in learning to use a noun, they need to pay attention to a variety of grammatical factors. In particular they need to know whether a noun is countable or uncountable, and if countable, what its plural form is. More generally, learners also need to be able to:

- use nouns to modify other nouns.
- choose and construct appropriate possessive forms.

What are nouns?

What do they do?

The popular definition of a noun is that it 'describes a person, place or thing'. In fact we use nouns to express a range of additional meanings such as concepts, qualities, organisations, communities, sensations and events. Nouns convey a substantial proportion of the information in most texts.

In the previous paragraph, the following words are nouns:

definition, noun, person, place, thing, fact, nouns, range, meanings, concepts, qualities, organisations, communities, sensations, events, Nouns, proportion, information, texts.

What do they look like?

Endings

A small proportion of nouns have identifiable 'noun endings'. These include:

*tradit**ion**, abil**ity**, excell**ence**, signific**ance**, fact**or**, rig**our**.*

Many plural nouns end in *s*, e.g. *cat**s***.

Proper nouns and capital letters

Words which begin with capital letters and are not at the beginning of sentences are often the names of people, places (towns, countries, etc.) or institutions. These are also called 'proper' nouns.

Lauren and Jack *Africa* *International House*

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We also use a capital letter in days of the week, months of the year and the names of nationalities, ethnic groups and languages.

Tuesday *August* *Swahili*

Where do nouns come in sentences?

Nouns can:

- act as the subject of a verb: ***Cats*** *kill mice.*
- act as the object of a verb: *Cats kill* ***mice.***
- act as the complement of a verb: *They are* ***men.***

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They often end a phrase which begins with an article such as *a(n)*, or a quantifier such as *either*, *any*, or *many*. They also often follow adjectives.

a ***drunk*** *either* ***way*** *a much older* ***elite*** *large* ***mice***

Countable and uncountable nouns

What are countable and uncountable nouns?

Countable or 'unit' nouns ([C]) have a singular and a plural form, e.g. *book* ⇒ *books*. Uncountable or 'mass' nouns ([U]) have only one form, e.g. *furniture* NOT **furnitures*.

[C]		[U]
Singular	**Plural**	
another ***biscuit***	*three* ***apples***	*not much* ***success***

The distinction between countable and uncountable is based on whether or not we can count (*1, 2, 3, 4 …*) what the nouns describe. Nouns which describe separate and separable objects (e.g. *book(s), centre(s), computer(s)*) are usually countable, while those which describe liquids, materials, substances and abstract qualities (e.g. *milk, marble, putty, success*) are characteristically uncountable.

Although the distinction between countable and uncountable is based on the reality of what the nouns describe, the distinction is a grammatical one rather than a real one. Some learners of English are surprised to discover that, for example, the following are uncountable:

accommodation, bread, hair, information, money, news, rubbish, spaghetti, travel, weather

Closely related countable and uncountable nouns

Some uncountable nouns have a countable equivalent which is a different word. In this case the countable noun usually describes something more limited or defined.

work [U]: *job* [C] *travel* [U]: *journey* [C]

The things some uncountable nouns describe can be 'broken up' into countable components.

[U]	[C]
money	*pounds, dollars, yen*
time	*hours, minutes, seconds*
furniture	*table, chair, desk*

With some uncountable nouns we can use particular words to itemise or count what they describe.

*three **blades** of grass* *an **item** of news*

Nouns which can be countable as well as uncountable

Some nouns are countable with one meaning, and uncountable with a different meaning.

*We got lost in a **wood**.* [C] ***Wood** burns more easily than coal.* [U]

Sometimes countable and uncountable forms represent two closely connected uses of one word.

*I told her a few **truths** about herself.* [C] *We'll never learn the **truth**.* [U]

Some nouns that were originally plural are becoming uncountable.

*the **data** are ⇒ the **data** is* *the **media** are ⇒ the **media** is*

We can use a lot of generally uncountable nouns as countable nouns, for example, to describe:

- a kind/type of something.

  *a new French **cheese*** *a fresh orange **juice***

- a quantity/unit of something.

  *a **beer*** *two **sugars***

Words which come before and after countable and uncountable nouns

Whether a noun is singular (countable), plural (countable) or uncountable determines, among other factors, which words we use before and after it.

Before the noun	[C] Singular	[C] Plural	[U]
indefinite articles *(a, an)*	*a* book	—	—
numbers	*one* book	*two* people	—
certain quantifiers	*each/either* book	*both/many* people	*much/a little* interest

After the noun	[C] Singular	[C] Plural	[U]
singular verb forms	a child *has*	—	information *is*
plural verb forms	—	insects *are*	—

agreement pp 107–8

Choosing a singular or plural verb form according to the kind of noun which precedes it is an aspect of agreement. It is sometimes confusing for learners that plural nouns end in *s* and that singular verbs also end in *s*.

Regular and irregular plural forms

Regular forms

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Most countable nouns have a plural form that ends in *s*.

Irregular forms

Many irregular plural forms involve a change in vowel.

man ⇒ *m**e**n* *tooth* ⇒ *t**ee**th* *foot* ⇒ *f**ee**t*

Learners sometimes find it difficult to remember which form is singular and which is plural.

Some nouns have the same singular and plural forms.

a sheep ⇒ *two sheep* *a series* ⇒ *two series*

Several nouns which end in *s* fall into this category, e.g. *a/various **means** of doing something, a/some **crossroads**.*

A few irregular plural forms are very different from the singular form. The most common and problematic example is *person* ⇒ *people*.

Nouns which have been absorbed into English from other languages sometimes keep their original plural form.

plateau ⇒ *plateau**x*** *cherub* ⇒ *cherub**im*** *mafioso* ⇒ *mafios**i***

A few words can be treated as either uncountable or plural.

*Politics **is** about people./Nobody knows what his politics **are**.*

In these cases different shades of meaning may be involved. *Politics*, for example, is more often uncountable when the word refers to the general science of politics, and plural when it has a more specific reference.

A few nouns exist only in a plural form (e.g. *arms* (in the military sense), *arrears*, *clothes*).

Language change

The standard plural form of some words, usually with a Latin or Greek root, is changing from its original form to an anglicised one.

foci ⇒ *focus**es* *syllabi* ⇒ *syllabus**es***

The original plural form of some words is coming into use as singular, although not everyone is comfortable with this change and it should, perhaps, be avoided in formal examinations.

*a criteri**a*** *a phenomen**a***

Using dictionaries

Because there is no way of telling whether a singular noun has a regular or an irregular plural form, we need to encourage learners to use a dictionary as a matter of course to check and learn the plural spelling and pronunciation of words that they come across.

Quantifying phrases

A number/range/variety of …

We use these expressions before plural nouns to express something about quantity or diversity, e.g. *a variety of issues*. If the expression is followed by a verb, this is also often in a plural form.

*A wide range of people **were** invited.*

However, some people prefer to use a singular form of the verb, particularly in formal written English.

*A variety of issues **was** raised.*

Phrases which specify a container or grouping are usually followed by a singular verb.

*A bunch of flowers **is** like a kiss.*

A (small/large etc.) amount of …

We use this phrase only before uncountable nouns. We usually qualify *amount* with an adjective such as *large* or *considerable*. Phrases including *amount* are followed by singular verbs.

the right amount of pasta

A (small/large etc.) quantity/proportion/majority of …

We can use these phrases before uncountable or plural nouns. We usually qualify *quantity* with an adjective such as *large* or *considerable.*

A pair of …

Some nouns which exist only in a plural form can be qualified by *a pair of* (e.g. *a pair of trousers/scissors/glasses*).

Collective nouns

Collective nouns are words which represent groups of people, e.g. *the* ***team***, *the Conservative* ***Party***. These nouns are singular in that we can talk about *an awful government* or *a big staff.*

Some people believe that these nouns should always be followed by singular verb forms (e.g. *the staff* ***was*** *happy*) and that singular pronouns should be used (e.g. *the team won* ***its*** *first match*). However, many people use plural verb forms and pronouns.

The management team ***want*** *to make* ***themselves*** *more accessible.*

People sometimes choose either singular or plural verb forms according to whether they are thinking in terms of a unified 'body' or of the various people who make it up.

*The army provid**es** an excellent career.*
*The army **are** investigating the incident.*

The names or initials of many organisations (e.g. *West Hatch High School, NATO*) also function like collective nouns.

Coca Cola are rapidly expanding.
The UN are sending in peace-keeping troops.

Combining nouns

Using nouns to modify nouns

We frequently use two nouns together.

an insect repellent *a computer virus* *a daffodil bulb*

modifiers
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The first, 'modifying', noun, or 'modifier', usually tells us what kind of a thing the second noun describes (an *insect repellent* is a kind of repellent; a *computer virus* is a kind of virus). Teachers sometimes refer to the modifying noun as an adjective, but this may confuse learners. Modifying nouns often end in *-ing* (e.g. *drink**ing** fountain*) and the second noun often ends in *er* (e.g. *office manag**er***).

When two nouns are frequently used together, they may be separated by a hyphen (-), e.g. *a battle-ground*, or written as a one-word compound noun (e.g. *weekend, dustbin*). Learners may want to use a dictionary to check this.

We normally stress the first, modifying, noun in these noun–noun combinations.

Combinations of more than two nouns also occur, frequently, for example, in newspaper headlines.

London tax increase shock

Possessive forms

Possessive *'s*

We add *'s* to nouns or noun phrases (groups of words containing a noun that can replace a single noun) to show that what follows belongs to them (e.g. *the teacher**'s** car*).

The last word in a noun phrase is not always a noun. However, we can still attach *'s* to the last word in the phrase.

*It's that girl I told you about**'s** book.*

Although we call this form the 'possessive *'s* ', we add *'s* to the end of nouns and noun phrases to express a number of relationships as well as possession.

Possession:	*Jackie's disk*
Family relationships:	*the other girl's twin*
Parts of the body:	*the patient's leg*
Creation:	*Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers', Einstein's theory*
Places:	*Asia's largest capital cities*
Time:	*two days' holiday*
Category:	*children's shoes*
Attribution:	*John's decision, the parents' fault*

Native speakers as well as learners often have difficulty in determining the position of the apostrophe (') in writing.

We place an apostrophe before the possessive *'s* on singular nouns (e.g. *a girl**'s** book*, *a man**'s** best friend*), and on irregular plural nouns (e.g. *The People**'s** Republic*, *women**'s** clothes*).

We generally add *'s* to singular nouns which already end in *s* (e.g. *Bridget Jones's Diary, St James's Palace*). However, some people prefer to add just an apostrophe after the final *s* (*James' book*). This is also correct.

The pronunciation rules for *'s* are the same as those for regular plural endings.

'Something of something'

We can use the 'something of something' structure as an alternative to *'s*, to express family relationships, creation and place.

Family relationships:	*the twin of the other girl*
Creation:	*the fifth symphony of Beethoven*
Place:	*the largest capital cities of Asia*

We generally choose this alternative when we want to draw attention to what we put at the end of the phrase (e.g. *Beethoven, Asia*). It is also more common in formal and written English.

When we are concerned with abstract and inanimate things, we can't use *'s* – we say *the depths of despair* and *a pile of rubbish* or *a rubbish pile*, NOT **the despair's depths* or **a rubbish's pile*.

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We also use this structure in expressions of position (e.g. *at the side of the house*) and quantity.

We generally don't use this structure to express possession (e.g. *Jackie's disk* NOT **the disk of Jackie*).

Pronunciation and spelling

Pronunciation

Regular forms

The regular plural ending has three possible pronunciations.

+ /ɪz/

We add /ɪz/ to singular nouns which end in the following sounds.

/ʧ/ *churches* /ʤ/ *judges* /s/ *passes* /z/ *mazes*

/ʃ/ *wishes* /ʒ/ *rouges*

+ /s/

We add /s/ to singular nouns which end in the following sounds.

/p/ *lips* /t/ *parts* /k/ *locks*

The sounds /p/, /t/, /k/, /θ/ and /f/ are all voiceless, i.e. we say them without making a 'humming' noise in the throat.

+ /z/

We add /z/ to words which end in all other sounds.

/n/ *tons* /g/ *frogs* /v/ *waves* /əʊ/ *toes*

At some point everyone needs to learn when we pronounce regular endings as /ɪz/ (e.g. *oranges*).

Words that end in /f/ and /θ/

Singular nouns which end in /f/ or /θ/ have a tendency to change their pronunciation in plural forms. Sometimes this is optional.

/f/ ⇒ /v/ *roofs:* /ruːfs/ or /ruːvz/
/θ/ ⇒ /ð/ *baths:* /bɑːθs/ or /bɑːðz/

However, some words that end in /f/ and /θ/ never change their pronunciation in the plural form. This includes all singular nouns that end in *ff*.

puff ⇒ *puffs:* /pʌfs/
cloth ⇒ *cloths:* /klɒθs/

Teaching

Although course materials often also pay attention to the distinction between /s/ and /z/, many learners automatically make this distinction. Even if they don't, this rarely leads to misunderstanding – teachers sometimes choose to gloss over this distinction in practice.

Using dictionaries

Learners need to use a dictionary to check the pronunciation of plural forms of words that end in *th* and *f*.

Spelling

Regular plural forms end in the letter *s*. Sometimes we just add *s* to the singular form (*pen* ⇒ *pen**s***), but we also sometimes add *es* and we change the spelling of some singular words which end in *y* to *ies*.

+ *es*

We add *es* to singular nouns which end in the following letters or combinations of letters.

*ch: chur**ches*** *s: pas**ses*** *x: bo**xes*** *sh: wi**shes*** *z: buz**zes***

We also add *es* to some singular nouns which end in *o*.

*potato**es*** *tomato**es***

y + *i* + *es*

We change *y* to *i* and add *es* to singular nouns which end in a combination of consonant + *y*.

party ⇒ *part**ies*** *lady* ⇒ *lad**ies***

f(e) + *v* + *es*

Some singular nouns which end in *f* end in *ves* in the plural form.

*loa**f*** ⇒ *loa**ves*** *lea**f*** ⇒ *lea**ves***

Most singular nouns which end in a combination of vowel + *fe* end in *ves* in the plural form.

*wi**fe*** ⇒ *wi**ves*** *li**fe*** ⇒ *li**ves***

Using dictionaries

Learners need to use a dictionary to check whether we add *s* or *es* to any particular words ending in *o*. They also need to check the plural form of singular words that end in *f* or *fe*.

Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

For many learners, not knowing the meaning of specific nouns they come across is a major problem. Problems with the grammar of nouns, however, rarely impedes understanding.

Speaking and writing

Word endings

Many adjectives have related noun forms (e.g. *beautiful*: *beauty, cautious*: *caution*). Learners sometimes make plausible and intelligent guesses about the form of these nouns, but their guess may be mistaken (e.g. **jealousness, *angriness, *youngtime*).

Capital letters

Mistakes vary and are often influenced by whether or not the learners' languages use capital letters and how these are used. Learners whose first language uses the same script as English often transpose rules from their own language to English (e.g. **I speak french*).