

English Grammar: Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Countable Nouns

Most nouns in English are “countable”, which means we can put “s”, “es” or “ies” after the words, and we can use numbers in front of them. Here are some examples:

- 6 books
- 10 elephants
- 12 shelves
- 16 foxes
- 20 babies
- 100 families

We can also use collective terms:

- **tens of** books
- **dozens of** elephants
- **scores of** children
- **hundreds of** babies
- **thousands of** families
- **millions of** people

Exercise 1. Type “4 score and ten” in Google search and see the result.

We can also use unspecific quantifiers:

- **a couple of** days
- **a few** problems
- **some** bananas
- **several** years
- **various** suggestions
- **many** students
- **a lot of** buildings

Exercise 2. Complete the following using unspecific quantifiers:

1. I received _____ presents for my birthday.
2. He reads _____ books every month.
3. This car costs _____ dollars.
4. In Brazil, there are _____ holes in the roads.
5. There are _____ colors in the rainbow.
6. This new law will affect _____ people.
7. I have _____ difficulties with English.
8. I usually have _____ pens on my desk.
9. Due to the pandemic, the restaurant receives only _____ customers each night.
10. There are _____ galaxies in our universe.

Uncountable Nouns

There are many nouns in English which are uncountable, which means we can't use numbers or put "s" after them. Here are some examples:

milk, water, coffee, juice, beer, wine, honey, rice, air, flour, sugar, money, baggage, bread, furniture, equipment, advice, information, work, homework, music, medicine, software, research, junk, trash, spam, traffic

However, we can use these unspecific quantifiers:

- **a little** (small quantity)
- **some** (undefined quantity)
- **much/a lot of** (large quantity)

Examples:

- I drink **a lot of milk** every day.
- Would you like **some beer**?
- I get **a lot of spam** in my inbox.
- There is **a lot of traffic** today.
- Many Brazilians eat **much rice** every day.
- John has **a lot of money**, but James only has **a little**.

Exercise 3. Complete using unspecific quantifiers:

1. The doctor advised me to drink _____ water every day.
2. Brazilians seem to eat _____ rice!
3. I have _____ money in my bank account.
4. Can you help me? I need _____ information about the museum.
5. There is _____ furniture in my office.
6. I always eat _____ bread for breakfast.
7. Yesterday I installed _____ software on my computer.
8. The management recently bought _____ equipment for the factory.
9. Would you like _____ coffee?
10. My brother Bob likes _____ sugar in his tea.

To enumerate uncountable nouns, we must use **specific quantifiers using** weight, volume or recipients. For example:

a bottle of	wine, vinegar, olive oil
a carton of	milk, juice
a jar of	honey, jam
a bag of	sugar, rice, flour
a can of	Coca-Cola, Fanta
a loaf of	bread
a tube of	toothpaste, glue
a liter of	water, juice
a cup of	tea, coffee
a glass of	beer, wine
a packet of	cigarettes, paracetamol
a kg of	potatoes, apples
a ton of	trash

Examples:

- Can you please buy **three liters of milk**?
- We would like **two cups of coffee**, please.
- **Two bottles of beer**, please.
- We want **6 cans of soda**.
- I usually drink **one glass of wine** in the evening with my dinner.
- I need to buy **two kilograms of sugar**.
- London produces **7 million tons of trash** every year.
- We should buy **2 packets of rice** for the barbecue on Sunday.

Exercise 4. Complete using specific quantifiers:

1. Let's get _____ wine for the party on Saturday.
2. I would like _____ beer, please.
3. Can you get _____ flour, when you go to the supermarket?
4. I'm going to buy _____ orange juice for the picnic.
5. Can you please buy _____ sugar in the corner shop?
6. We don't have all the ingredients. I'm just going out to buy _____ salt.
7. Can you please buy a _____ grape juice?
8. I will buy two _____ salt.
9. We need a _____ syrup for the recipe.
10. My wife is going to buy six _____ sugar.
11. I would like two _____ fizzy water, please.
12. Our family needs ten _____ rice every month.

There are some nouns which are countable in Portuguese, but which **are not** countable in English. Here are some examples:

baggage, bread, furniture, equipment, advice, information, work, homework, housework, music, feedback, medicine, software, hardware, research

- I always take **a lot of baggage** with me when I travel abroad.
- I must buy **some bread** later today.
- I have **a lot of furniture** in my house.
- There is only **a little equipment** in our laboratory.
- Let me give you **some advice**.
- Can you give me **some information** about the course, please?
- I have **a lot of work** to do today.
- The teacher always gives us **a lot of homework!**
- I do **a little housework** every weekend.
- There is **much music** that I like, for example Jazz and Bossa Nova.
- We receive a lot of **feedback** from the customers.
- The doctor told me that I should take **some medicine**.
- I have **a lot of software** on my computer.
- There is **a lot of hardware** in my office.
- Sarah did **some research** for on Egypt last week.

If you want to specify only 'one' (or another number) of something, then we can say '**a piece of**' or '**pieces of**'. For example:

a piece of advice	or	two pieces of advice
a piece of furniture	or	three pieces of furniture
a piece of equipment	or	six pieces of equipment
a piece of information	or	two pieces of information
a piece of work	or	five pieces of work
a piece of music	or	twenty pieces of music
a piece of homework	or	many pieces of homework
a piece of music	or	thousands of pieces of music
a piece of software	or	dozens of pieces of software
a piece of research	or	many pieces of research

Example sentences:

- Every day, my father gave me a **piece of advice**.
- I have **three pieces of information** for you
- I have **four pieces of homework** to do this week.
- This pen-drive holds **4,000 pieces of music!** (or 4,000 songs)
- I have to do **many pieces of work** before the end of the day. (or many tasks)

Exercise 5. Complete using 'a piece of' or 'pieces of'. Use the given quantities.

1. I need to give you _____ advice. (1)
2. My office has _____ furniture. (6)
3. Today, we must install _____ software. (3)
4. My boss has given me _____ work to do. (4)
5. I must remember _____ information for the test tomorrow. (20)
6. This pendrive can hold _____ music. (1000)

Some English nouns can be **countable** or **uncountable**, depending on the context. For example:

1. Pizza: Our family eats **two large pizzas** every Friday! (*countable*)
Would you like **some pizza**? (*uncountable*)
2. Cakes: I made **six cakes** last month. (*countable*)
I am hungry. I think I will eat **some cake**. (*uncountable*)
3. Chocolate: This box contains **24 chocolates**. (*countable*)
He eats **a lot of chocolate** – he is so fat! (*uncountable*)

Suggested video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjPoypKl11g> (10 mins)

Countable “children”

Some uncountable nouns have countable “children”. For example:

