Help With: Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Countable nouns refer to things that exist as separate and distinct individual units. They usually refer to what can be perceived by the senses.

Uncountable nouns refer to things that can’t be counted because they are thought of as wholes that can’t be cut into parts. They often refer to abstractions and occasionally have a collective meaning (for example, furniture). Liquids are usually uncountable nouns. Some animals are traditionally uncountable.

- anger
- furniture
- staff
- wine
- corn
- stuff
- education
- information
- fish
- beer
- weather
- advice
- deer
- snow
- water

Think of the batter from which a cake is made. Before you put the batter into the oven, it can’t be divided into parts because it’s a liquid. Once it has been baked, it becomes solid enough to be cut into pieces. Uncountable nouns are like cake batter; count nouns are like pieces of cake.

Most countable nouns pluralize with –s. Uncountable nouns don’t pluralize at all.

Countable
The talks will take place in the Bluestone building. (refers to a number of specific lectures)

Uncountable
Light travels faster than sound. (refers to the way light and sound behave in general)

Sometimes, if you are comparing groups, a normally uncountable noun can be counted.

There are several French wines to choose from.
The fruits and vegetables of Southeast Asia look and smell different but are delicious.
The general had many staffs working for him.

Articles
Uncountable nouns usually do not need articles unless you are specifying a particular quantity.

Milk in North America usually comes from cows. (Milk in general)
Susan spilled the milk I bought on the floor. (a specific milk: the one I bought)

Exceptions
There are some exceptions and variations which are usually slang usages or set expressions.

Tom, can you bring three coffees? (‘cups of’ is meant but omitted because it’s obvious)
The rains came early this season.