Count vs. Noncount Nouns

Before forming plurals correctly, it is important to understand the difference between count and noncount nouns. **Count** nouns are the nouns that we can physically count (e.g. one table, two tables, three tables), so they make a distinction between singular and plural forms. **Noncount** nouns are the nouns that cannot be counted, and they do not make a distinction between singular and plural forms. Although these nouns may refer to large quantities of things, they act like singular nouns grammatically.

**Noncount nouns:**
1. Never take the plural ending "s"
2. Always take a singular verb
3. Cannot be used with the indefinite article “a/an” and are frequently used with no article at all
4. Are used with collective quantity words like “a lot of,” “some,” “any,” “much,” or “more,” instead of count words like “many,” “several,” “two,” or “few.”

If you work on an academic paper, keep these non-count nouns in mind because they are often misused: money, research, advice, knowledge, information, and evidence (NOT moneys, researches, advices, etc.).

The following categories of words frequently contain noncount nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Non-count nouns</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstractions</td>
<td>Beauty, revenge, knowledge, progress, poverty</td>
<td>Ignorance causes poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquids and gases</td>
<td>water, beer, air, gasoline, milk</td>
<td>Gas is cheaper than oil. Wine is my favorite beverage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>gold, silver, wood, glass, sand</td>
<td>He had a will made of iron. Gold is more valuable than silver.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Categories of food</td>
<td>rice, flour, cheese, salt, yogurt</td>
<td>Bread is delicious. Meat and cheese are sources of protein.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>French, English, Korean</td>
<td>Navejo is a complex language. Do you speak German?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic fields</td>
<td>physics, astronomy, music</td>
<td>Philosophy is a difficult subject. My brother is majoring in biology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports and games</td>
<td>tennis, golf, basketball</td>
<td>Do you play chess? Soccer is becoming more popular in America.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>fog, wind, snow</td>
<td>Severe drought can cause famine. The city of Buffalo gets more snow than most cities in New York state.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natural phenomena</td>
<td>gravity, nuclear energy, magnetism</td>
<td>Electricity is a form of energy. Newton discovered the principles of gravity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerunds (verbal nouns)</td>
<td>running, singing, smoking</td>
<td>Swimming is excellent exercise. Sleeping during class is not recommended.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Groups of things of varying size and shape</td>
<td>jewelry, garbage, luggage, equipment</td>
<td>Fine jewelry is expensive. Trash was thrown everywhere in the room.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### More rules for nouncount nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you denote a specific number or quantity of noncount nouns?</td>
<td>Use count nouns such as <em>piece</em>, <em>ton</em>, <em>cup</em>, etc. paired with <em>of</em> and a plural verb.</td>
<td>Ten pieces of jewelry were stolen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about general quantities?</td>
<td>Use general words such as <em>more</em>, <em>much</em>, <em>a lot of</em>, <em>less</em>, and <em>a large quantity of</em>, but keep your noncount noun singular.</td>
<td>We need to do more research. A lot of valuable information is contained in this paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if the noncount noun is definite?</td>
<td>As soon as you specify a noncount noun by attaching a defining phrase to it, you must use <em>the</em> just as you would with any other noun.</td>
<td>The beauty of the night was overwhelming. The information that you gave me was valuable. (VS. <em>Information is valuable.</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do some non-count nouns take the ending –s?</td>
<td>Yes, some non-counts nouns, for example <em>news</em>, <em>physics</em>, and <em>species</em>, end in –s. This ending, however, is not a plural ending – this is simply the way a noun ends. These words will take a singular verb as any other non-count verb.</td>
<td>This news is important. Physics is my favorite subject.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Some nouns can be used as either non-count or count nouns, and the meaning of these nouns changes slightly depending on the form being used. The non-count form refers to the whole idea or quantity, whereas the count noun refers to a specific example or type.

**Noncount**  
(1a) Linguistics is the study of *language*.  
(2a) To paint requires a lot of *work*.  
(3a) This *wine* is delicious.

**Count**  
(1b) Some *languages*, like English and Spanish, are international.  
(2b) This painting is a *work* of art.  
(3b) The *wines* of France are famous.

*Adapted from: Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers by Nigel A. Caplan*
Practice

Fill in the correct form of the noun:

Equipment may consist of several computers.
1. Much of the office ____ is new. (equipment)
2. Several of the ____ are being replaced. (computer)

Scenery may have several views.
3. We drove to the top of the mountain to see the ____ of the lake. (view)
4. We looked at the ____ as we drove along the highway. (scenery)

Luggage may consist of several suitcases.
5. I put my ____ in the trunk. (luggage)
6. I have too many ____ for this trip! (suitcase)

Software may be made up of several applications.
7. I buy my ____ at the Apple Store. (software)
8. How many ____ do you have on your computer? (application)

Art may consist of several paintings.
9. We saw a number of ____ by Van Gogh at the National Gallery. (painting)
10. What type of ____ do you prefer? (art)

Candy may consist of several pieces.
11. May I have some ____? (candy)
12. May I have a ____ after dinner? (candy bar)

Work may consist of several jobs.
13. I do a lot of ____ every semester. (work)
14. I have two ____ on the weekend. (job)

Mail may consist of several letters.
15. The mailman delivered the ____ late today. (mail)
16. I have only received two ____ from my friend this month. (letter)

Clothing may consist of several shirts, pants, dresses, and suits.
17. I hate to wash and iron the family’s _____. (clothing)
18. My ____ needs ironing. (shirt)

Furniture may consist of several chairs or tables.
19. I want all new ____ for my new house. (furniture)
20. Which ____ needs to be repaired? (chair)
21. I need many ____ for the meeting. (chair)

Hair may consist of several hairs.
22. I need to wash my ____ tonight. (hair)
23. I found two ____ on my black dress. (hair)

Money may consist of several dollars.
24. I put all my ____ in the bank. (money)
25. How many ____ do you have in your wallet? (dollar)

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