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# Ms. Particular Presents: Mass, Count, and Collective Nouns

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## *Count* nouns are those that name things that occur in discrete units (they're quantized!)

Examples: problem, particle, occurrence, sample, capacitor, collision, calculation, analysis

Count nouns can be modified by a number (one atom, 50 000 collisions per ms, 24 sensors, a dozen apples)

Count nouns may be singular or plural

Singular count nouns can take an indefinite article (*a* or *an*)

Count nouns may be modified by a *quantifier* (e.g., *every, each, several, many, few*)

*Mass* **nouns are those that name things that are treated as undifferentiated units**

Examples: flour, water, equipment, evidence, knowledge, research, jargon, physics, damage, information, work, advice, progress, stuff

**Mass nouns are indivisible; they are almost always\* expressed as a <u>singular</u> in English and take a <u>singular verb</u>**

**Although they are treated as singular, mass nouns cannot take an indefinite article (*a* or *an*)**

**Mass nouns cannot be modified by most *quantifiers* (e.g., *many, few, several, each*)**

**Some mass nouns (those that can be weighed or measured) can be modified by a number if a unit of measure is specified (2 kg of flour, 3 ml of water)**

\*It's English—there are *always* exceptions

**A mass noun is a *grammatical* construct**

**Whether a noun is a mass noun has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the object or objects to which the noun refers**

What nouns describe this photo?

*car, truck, SUV, motorcycle, highway, road, lane, median*



*traffic, transportation*

A good review: https://www.thoughtco.com/mass-nouns-or-noncount-nouns-1692801

**Dividing a mass noun into its constituent parts requires adding another word or using a completely different word\***

**clothing** → article **of clothing**

**equipment** → piece **of equipment**

**pollution** → **pollutant**

**literature** → **article, monograph, book, poem**

**text** → **letters, words, phrase, sentence, page, chapter**

**research** → **experiment, project, study, investigation, calculation, analysis**

**\*note that the words for the parts are *count nouns***

**Common mistake—making mass nouns plural (which changes the meaning)**

**damage (mass) = physical harm that impairs an object's value, usefulness, or normal function**
**damages (mass) = a sum of money claimed or awarded by a court to compensate a victim for a loss or injury**
**text (mass) = the collection of words on a page or screen**
**texts (count) = individual books or manuscripts (think textbooks)**
**work (mass) = activity involving mental or physical effort**
**works (count) = individual products of human (usually artistic) endeavor—think *works* of art—OR an industrial complex or engineering structure (steel*works*) OR an internal mechanism (the *works* of a watch)**

## Common mistake—using the wrong modifier

**"Suppressing epidemics with a limited amount of immunization units"**

*units* are counted; should be <u>number</u>

**"Quantum, classical, and total amount of correlations in a quantum state"**

*correlations* are counted; should be <u>number</u>

**"Nonlinear optics with less than one photon"**

*photons* are counted; should be <u>fewer than</u>

(all titles from PRL articles, <sigh>)

## Use the correct modifier!

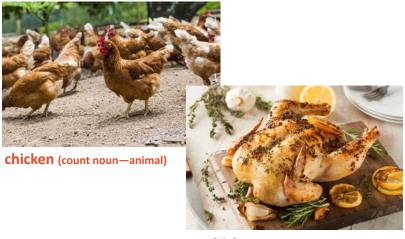| Mass Nouns | Count Nouns |
|---|---|
| no <u>indefinite</u> articles (*a* or *an*) | can take any article |
| more than | more than |
| less than (weighed or measured) | fewer than (counted) |
| amount of (weighed or measured) | number of (counted) |
| as much as (weighed or measured) | as many as (counted) |

**Writing "The Raman studies showed the effects of varying excitation energies on the type and <u>amount</u> of defects in graphene" is not strictly wrong, and people will understand what you mean, but it sounds witless. *Defects* are counted, not weighed or measured.**

**Some words may be used as both mass and count nouns, but their meanings are different**



**chicken** (count noun—animal)



**chicken** (mass noun—foodstuff)

**A *collective* noun refers to a collection of things taken as a whole**

Examples: audience, committee, faculty, ensemble, class, team, array, group, bunch

Most collective nouns are treated as singular in US English and take singular verbs and singular pronouns
*The committee nominates the club's officers.*
*The committee tabled its discussion of the budget.*

If the members of a group are not acting in unison, plural verbs and pronouns might be used
*The committee are fighting among themselves.*
*The committee adjourned to stretch their legs.*

Collective nouns can be mass (*audience*) or count (*team*)