
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The Grammar Gameshow

Countable and uncountable nouns

Will

Hello, and welcome to today's Grammar Gameshow! I'm your host, Will! I am rubber, you're glue. It bounces off me and sticks to you. And of course, let's not forget Leslie, our all-knowing voice in the sky.

Leslie

Hello, everyone!

Will

Tonight we're going to ask you three questions about...

Leslie

Countable and uncountable nouns. Those people, things, and places that tell us what we're talking about!

Will

OK! Now, let's meet our contestants!

Bill

Hello, all. My name is Bill.

Will

And contestant number two?

Yun

It's nice to meet you. I'm Yun.

Will

Nice to see you again Bill. You're making quite a name for yourself in this show. And welcome Yun. OK, let's get going, and don't forget you can play along at home too. Here is our first question. Nouns in English can be divided into countable and uncountable. But, what are the basic differences between them?

Bill

Countable nouns can be counted. Uncountable nouns can't. Or not can't, they can... but we don't usually... I mean who really wants to sit there and count grains of rice?

Will

Leslie?

Leslie

Correct! Countable nouns can be divided into singular and plural. A chair, two chairs, three chairs. Uncountable nouns cannot. With countable nouns we ask how many and use words such as a lot, many and a few. With uncountable nouns, we use how much and words such as a lot, much and a little.

Will

All clear on that? Let's have an alphabet battle to check. It's simple. Challenge each other to give examples of countable and uncountable nouns following the order of the alphabet. Yun, you can go first. Ready? Go!

Yun

Uncountable.

Bill

A for Art.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

Countable.

Yun

B for Beds.

Leslie

Correct!

Yun

Countable.

Bill

C for cars.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

Uncountable.

Yun

D for danger.

Leslie

Correct!

Yun

Countable.

Bill

Elephants.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

Uncountable.

Yun

Fish.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

But, fish is countable!

Yun

wait ... er... fishes?

Bill

Oi!

Will

What was... sorry I was thinking about something else...

Bill

She's cheating!

Will

Cheating! Well, I didn't see anything. That is a very serious accusation you're making. Do you have any evidence?

Bill

Roll up her sleeve!

Will

I can't, I'm afraid! I can no longer touch the contestants after that unfortunate chainsaw-related game show accident in episode 37... but that was such a long time ago. Leslie? Fish?

Leslie

Fish is both countable and uncountable depending on whether you mean the animal – I see three fish – or the food – I eat lots of fish. This is not the only noun like this, so be careful!

Will

Well done! I think Yun did better, so twelve points for you. On to our second round, and this is a double-trouble round of two questions about uncountables. Here we go! Question one. If uncountable nouns cannot be counted, how then can we count them?

Yun

Can't we use a container to make them countable?

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

She's doing it again!

Will

Eh? Yes, you're right! Time for our second uncountable question... now that's a paradox of words! Fruit is an uncountable noun. How then is this sentence correct? There were at least 12 fruits on offer.

Yun

It's an irregular plural that refers to the different types of thing in the same category.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

Will! She's cheating!

Will

So, you keep saying, but do you have any evidence?

Bill

I literally just filmed it on my phone.

Will

What are you doing there? You could be blog-tubing the answers! Put that away! Tut, tut, tut! Leslie?

Leslie

Tut, tut, tut, Bill! To make an uncountable noun countable we need to use a container. This is an expression commonly using a and of. For example, a piece of cake or a cup of coffee. Secondly, some nouns, such as fruit and fish, have an irregular plural – fruits and fishes. We use these when we are referring to a number of different types of thing from the same category. For example, the shop sells three fruits – apples, bananas and oranges!

Will

Well done, Yun! Another fantastic round and another ten points. OK on to our fi...

Bill

Look! Hang on a minute! Before we go any further... Can you just please keep an eye on her? Please?

Will

Oh, very well. If for no other reason than it's not nice to see a grown man beg... except for Leslie, of course. Round three! Have a look at these sentences and tell me why the noun used in each one is special in some way.

- a) The news was reported.
- b) The species is extinct.
- c) The team play well.
- d) The staff are unhappy.

Bill

In A the noun news is uncountable. However, many people may see the 's' at the end, and think that it is a plural. Oh no! There is no singular or plural. News is uncountable!

Leslie

Correct!

Yun

I'm just guessing here, but the noun species in B is unusual because it's singular and has no plural form. So, just to say again – the noun species singular and plural forms are the same.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

In C the noun team is a collective. This means it can be singular or plural. It depends on the speaker.

Leslie

Correct!

Yun

I'm going to go out on a limb here, but the noun staff in D is singular... just like news. So, just to repeat that. Staff is a collective noun that takes plural verb form.

Leslie

Correct!

Bill

It's the audience! They're... no it's... someone's coughing!

Will

Bill, sometimes people cough. It's not illegal. Maybe the stress of four wins is beginning to show. Leslie?

Leslie

Nice! English has some irregular nouns which you need to be careful of! Some nouns, such as species, fish and sheep are the same whether they are singular or plural. Some nouns, such as news and mathematics, always take a singular verb. Some nouns, such as staff and police, are collective, and so are always plural. And finally, there are some collective nouns, such as team, government and family, which can be either singular or plural depending on whether you mean a single unit – it - or a group of individuals - they.

Will

Well done! Three points each! And that brings us to the end of today's Grammar Gameshow. Let's count out the points... And the winner is... Yun! Or at least it would be if she hadn't been blatantly cheating this whole time!

Both

What!?

Will

Don't you think I don't see everything that goes on around here? I see all and I hear all. Incidentally Bill, you might want to go to the doctor. Your stomach's been making some quite ...biological noises.

Bill

Why didn't you say something before?

Will

Well, it's your stomach Bill... Oh! You mean about the cheating. Well, I've got a time slot to fill. Bye bye, Yun. Release the disappointed parents. And Bill? No one likes a snitch. It looks like we'll need two more contestants. Thanks for joining us. Say goodbye, Leslie

Leslie

Sağol, Leslie.

Will

See you next time.