

# 13 Compound nouns – combinations of two nouns

**A**

A compound noun is a fixed expression which is made up of more than one word and functions as a noun. Such expressions are frequently combinations of two nouns, e.g. **address book**, **human being**, **science fiction**. A number of compound nouns are related to phrasal verbs and these are dealt with in Unit 14.

**B**

Compound nouns may be written as two words, e.g. **tin opener**, **bank account**, or they may be written with a hyphen instead of a space between the words, e.g. **pen-name**, **baby-sitter**. Some expressions are occasionally written with a hyphen and occasionally as two separate words. For instance, both **letter box** and **letter-box** are correct. Sometimes they may be written as one word, e.g. **earring**.

**C**

Compound nouns may be countable, uncountable or only used in either the singular or the plural. There are examples of each of these types below. Check that you understand the meanings of each of the expressions listed. If you understand both elements of the expression, the meaning will usually be clear. If the meaning is not fairly obvious, then it is provided below.

**D**

Usually the main stress is on the first part of the compound but sometimes it is on the second part. The word which contains the main stress is underlined in the compound nouns below.

Here are some examples of common countable compound nouns.

|                      |                        |                            |                     |
|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| <u>alarm</u> clock   | <u>assembly</u> line   | <u>blood</u> donor         | <u>book</u> token   |
| <u>burglar</u> alarm | <u>contact</u> lens    | <u>credit</u> card         | <u>handcuffs</u>    |
| <u>heart</u> attack  | <u>package</u> holiday | <u>pedestrian</u> crossing | <u>shoe</u> horn    |
| <u>tea</u> -bag      | <u>windscreen</u>      | <u>windscreen</u> wiper    | <u>youth</u> hostel |

Here are some examples of common uncountable compound nouns. These are never used with an article.

|                            |                        |                       |   |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| <u>air-traffic</u> control | <u>birth</u> control   | <u>blood</u> pressure | cotton <u>wool</u>                      |
| <u>data-processing</u>     | family <u>planning</u> | <u>food</u> poisoning | <u>pocket</u> money                     |
| <u>income</u> tax          | <u>junk</u> food       | <u>mail</u> order     | <u>hay</u> fever<br>(allergy to pollen) |

Here are some examples of common compound nouns used only in the singular.

|  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| <u>arms</u> race (countries wanting most powerful weapons)                 | <u>death</u> penalty |
| <u>generation</u> gap  | <u>labour</u> force  |
| <u>mother-tongue</u>   | <u>sound</u> barrier |
| <u>greenhouse</u> effect   | <u>welfare</u> state |
| <u>brain</u> drain (highly educated people leaving country to work abroad) |                      |

Here are some examples of common compound nouns used only in the plural.

|                       |                     |                     |                         |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| grass <u>roots</u>    | luxury <u>goods</u> | human <u>rights</u> | kitchen <u>scissors</u> |
| <u>race</u> relations | <u>roadworks</u>    | <u>sunglasses</u>   | <u>traffic</u> lights   |

# 14 Compound nouns – verb + preposition

**A**

A large number of compound nouns (see Unit 13) are based on phrasal verbs. In Sections B to E you will see a number of examples of such nouns in context. The meaning of the compound noun is indicated in brackets at the end of the sentence. To form the plural, 's' is added to the end, e.g. **pin-ups**.

**B**

Nouns based on phrasal verbs often have an informal feel to them and they are particularly common in newspaper reporting. Here are examples of such nouns in use.

In response to the pay offer, there was a **walk-out** at the factory. [strike]  
There is going to be a **crack-down** on public spending. [action against]  
There has been a **break-out** from the local prison. [escape]  
Last month saw a tremendous **shake-up** in personnel. [change]  
I never expected the **break-up** of the USSR. [collapse]

**C**

A number of these nouns have economic associations.

The **takeover** of one of our leading hotel chains has just been announced. [purchase by another company]  
We're trying to find some new **outlets** for our products. [places to sell]  
Take your things to the **check-out** to pay for them. [cash-desk]  
**Cutbacks** will be essential until the recession is over. [reductions]  
We made a profit of £1000 on a **turnover** of £10,000. [money passing through a company]

**D**

Some of these nouns are associated with technology and other aspects of contemporary life.

What the computer produces depends on the quality of the **input**. [information that is put in]  
**Output** has increased thanks to new technology. [production]  
We have a rather rapid staff **turnover**. [change]  
Just after leaving school he went through the stage of being a **dropout**. [person who rejects society]  
It will be a long time before the consequences of **fallout** from Chernobyl are no longer felt. [radio-active dust in the atmosphere]  
I can easily get you a **printout** of the latest figures. [paper on which computer information has been printed]  
A **breakthrough** has been made in AIDS research. [important discovery]

**E**

Some of the words can be used in more general circumstances.

Many of the problems were caused by a **breakdown** in communications. [failure]  
The **outlook** for tomorrow is good – sunny in most places. [prospect]  
There are **drawbacks** as well as advantages to every situation. [negative aspects]  
The **outcome** of the situation was not very satisfactory. [conclusion]  
TV companies always welcome **feedback** from viewers. [comments]  
It was clear from the **outset** that the **set-up** would cause problems. [start; situation]  
We parked in a **lay-by** on the **by-pass**. [parking space at the side of a road; road avoiding the centre of a town]  
The **outbreak** of war surprised them. [start of something unpleasant, e.g. disease, violence]