

SECTION B

Language use

Countable and uncountable nouns

Look at the following sentences:

1. *Assets* are *resources* owned or controlled by a *company*.
2. *A note* payable refers to a formal *promise* of a future *amount*.
3. *Accounting* is the activity of recording, storing and processing the data deriving from any business operations.
4. *Equity* is also called net assets or residual equity.

Common nouns fall into two main categories: *countable nouns* (also *count nouns*), like *assets*, *resources*, *company*, *note*, *promise*, *amount* (as used in sentences 1 and 2 above) which can be seen as denoting individual countable entities and not as an undifferentiated mass; *uncountable nouns* (also called *non-count* or *mass nouns*), such as *accounting* and *equity* in sentences 3 and 4, by contrast can be seen as denoting an undifferentiated mass or continuum (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1972: 246).

Uncountable nouns can never be used in the plural as they refer to things or notions that cannot be counted with numbers.

Among them there are abstract nouns: *advice*, *information*, *news*, *knowledge*, *evidence*, *help*, *pity*, *work*, *courage*, *weather*, *progress*, etc.; nouns referring to substances considered in general: *bread*, *beer*, *gold*, *dust*, *soap*, *jam*, *wine*, *oil*, *butter*, etc.; and some

other nouns which are countable in other languages (e.g. Italian): *luggage, baggage, damage, furniture, hair, equipment*.

These nouns are always in the singular and cannot be used with the indefinite article *a/an*. When we talk about them in terms of quantity, they are preceded by determiners *some, any, no, a little, a lot of, much*, etc. For instance:

Twitter is becoming one of the leading platforms providing *financial news*.

This office is a great place to get *some work* done with a view.

I am sure he will make a *lot of progress* if he is given this opportunity.

There is *no evidence* that these devices actually work.

They have not made *much progress*.

They can also be preceded by nouns such as *bit, piece, slice + of* or exact measurements like *a cup of, a bag of, a handful of, a pinch of, etc.*

For example:

a bag of sugar, a piece of advice, a slice of bread, a pinch of salt,

as used in a sentence:

The key *piece of information* in this case is how much they paid for it.

The New York City Police Department says they've gathered "quite a *bit of evidence*" about the case.

Some nouns can be classified as both count and noncount, for instance *beauty, difficulty, experience, damage, hair, business* with a more or less substantial difference in meaning. See the following examples of the same words used as countable (C) or uncountable (U):

(U) Today advertising is based on a Eurocentric concept of *beauty*.

(C) The tourist industry counts on the natural *beauties* of the region.

(U) The CEO said that they were expecting *much difficulty* as he sought to tie up the deal.

(C) The Company is expected to go through economic *difficulties*.

(U) They want to hire a candidate with *a lot of experience*.

(C) Many toy retailers create *a unique experience* for shoppers.

(U) The company grows natural dyes for *hair*.

(C) People have between 100,000 and 150,000 *hairs* on their head.

(C) Some *hairs*, such as eyelashes, are especially sensitive to the presence of potentially harmful matter.

(U) The tornado injured some residents and caused *damage* to homes and businesses [here "damage" means harm, injury or loss].

(C) Researchers found that flooding has caused nearly \$51 billion in *damages* to Western states in the last 40 years [here "damages" means compensation in money that is paid by

who has been responsible for causing them some injury or loss; plural only]

(U) The town has a growing economy and is a great place to do *business* [here "business" means the activity of buying and selling goods and services].

(C) A partnership is a *business* owned by two or more people [here "business" means a commercial enterprise].

(C) At present we are strengthening our tobacco *business*, which is our core *business* [here "business" means trade, commercial activity].

(C) Many *works* of art are initially denied "museum quality".

(C) This picture shows steel *works* producing steel wire rods at Haybridge Steel Works in the 1950s.

For some uncountable nouns there exists a corresponding countable noun which can be used with the article *a / an* and in the plural: *work / job, progress / advance, evidence / proof*.

Finding a suitable balance between *work* and daily living is a challenge.

When you resign from *a job*, it is important to check on compensation due

The US says "Some *progress* was made at the latest NAFTA talks." (newspaper headline)

New classes of magnetoelectric materials promise *advances* in computing technology.

(cf. Quirk *et al.* 1972: 245-248; Thompson and Martinett 1990: 28-29)

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