

Countable and uncountable nouns

English A2

What this topic teaches

English divides nouns into two families: **countable** (you can count them: one book, two books) and **uncountable** (you cannot: *water, music, homework*). Chinese actually knows this game – it uses measure words for everything: , . English just plays it differently.

- Countable nouns take *a/an*, plurals, and *many*: *a book, many books*.
- Uncountable nouns take no *a*, no plural, and *much*: *some water, much money*.
- Memory hook: countable things can be separated and counted on your fingers. Uncountable things are soup : you cannot count soup, you can only have more of it.
- *homework* is uncountable because no matter how much you finish, more remains. It cannot be counted, only survived.

The two families' tools

Tool	Countable	Uncountable
one	a book	× (no a!)
plural	books	× (no -s!)
a large amount	many books	much water
a small amount	a few books	a little water
some / any	some books	some water
how question	How many books?	How much water?

- *some/any* serve both families: *some books, some water, any ideas, any money*.
- *a few* (countable) and *a little* (uncountable) both mean “some, enough”: *I have a few friends. I have a little money*. Positive feeling.
- Without the *a*, they turn negative : *I have few friends. I have little money*. – almost none, said with a sad face.

The famous uncountables

These words fool everyone, because they feel countable in Chinese:

- **homework** – never *homeworks*. *I have a lot of homework*. (A whole life of it, in fact.)
- **money** – never *moneys*. *How much money?*
- **information, advice, news** – never with -s: *a piece of information, some good advice, the news is sad*.

- **water, milk, bread, rice** – drinks and staples .
- **music, furniture** – *some music, a lot of furniture*.

△ *news* looks plural but is singular: *The news **is** good*. The -s is a historical accident , not a plural.

Measuring the uncountable

To count soup, you need a container. English measures uncountables with *a ____ of*:

- *a bottle of water, a cup of tea, a piece of bread, a piece of advice, a piece of homework* (yes, teachers say this with a smile).
- Then the container takes the plural: *two bottles of water, three pieces of advice*.
- This is exactly the measure-word logic of *yì píng shuǐ*, so you already own this machine. English just owns fewer measures and uses them only for the soup family.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **The -s temptation.** “*homeworks, moneys, informations, advices*” – all ×. These nouns are soup. *much homework, a piece of information, some advice*.
- △ **many money is doubly wrong:** *money* is uncountable, so *much money*; and *how much money do you have?* (Your wallet knows the answer is “little”, not “few”.)
- △ **a bread** ×. Bread is soup: *some bread, a piece of bread, a loaf of bread*. Bakeries sell loaves; grammar sells pieces.
- △ **Singular verb with uncountables.** *The homework **is** hard. The news **is** sad*. One soup, one verb.

Say it aloud

Take inventory of your life, family by family.

- Countable: three books, two pens, a few friends, many dreams.
- Uncountable: much homework, a little money, some music, a lot of rice.
- A piece of advice: never count your homework aloud. It hears you and grows.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *How _____ money do you have?* – **much**. Money is soup.
2. *She gave me some good _____ (advice).* – **advice**. No -s; advice is uncountable.
3. *I have _____ friends here.* (positive feeling) – **a few**. With the *a*, it's enough; without it, it's sad.
4. *Two _____ of water, please.* – **bottles**. The container takes the plural; the water stays soup.
5. *The news _____ (is/are) good.* – **is**. The -s is a historical accident, not a plural.