

## Two-way or double nouns

### What are two-way or double nouns?

Two-way nouns, also called double nouns, are nouns that can be either count or noncount depending on their meaning in context. Typically, the noncount version describes a general or abstract concept and the count version describes a specific item or example.

### What is meant by count and noncount nouns?

A **count noun** is a noun that **can be counted**. It takes an indefinite article (a / an).

*I mailed a letter. Suzanne mailed five letters. (Letter is a count noun; letters are countable.)*

A **noncount noun cannot be counted**. It does not take an indefinite article (a / an).

*Yesterday, I received mail. (Mail is a noncount noun; while we cannot count mail in general, we can count pieces of mail.)*

**For more information about article use with count and noncount nouns, refer to the Writing Centre handout, "ARTICLES with COUNT and NONCOUNT NOUNS."**

### How can I know if a noun is a two-way noun?

There is no definitive rule governing which nouns fall into the two-way category. Determining if a noun may be classified as 'two-way' often depends on whether its meaning changes in different contexts. There are some common categories that we can use as a general guide to determine if a noun is both count and noncount. Consider the following examples:

**Animals that are also considered food:** fish / a fish, duck / a duck, bison / a bison

- Examples: a) I had moose for dinner while visiting my Cree relatives. (*Refers to the food.*)  
b) There is a moose in the woods over there. (*Refers to the animal.*)

**Materials that are also common items:** fabric / a fabric, brick / a brick

- Examples: a) The house is made out of straw. (*Refers to the material.*)  
b) I don't want a straw in my drink. (*Refers to the drinking tool.*)

**Items for which vessels can be implied:** ice cream / an ice cream, tea / a tea

- Examples: a) I love ice cream in the summer. (*Refers to the general food category.*)  
b) I bought an ice cream on my way home from work. (*"Cone" is implied.*)

**Nouns for which a genitive phrase\* can be implied:** shampoo / a shampoo, cheese / a cheese, technology / a technology, speed / a speed, analysis / an analysis

\* **Genitive phrases commonly use "of" – e.g. process of**

- Examples: a) I bought a new shampoo from the salon. (*"Kind of / type of" is implied.*)  
b) I use shampoo to wash my hair. (*Refers to the product in general.*)

**Abstract concepts that can be bound by specific conditions, like time, space, or physicality:** experience / an experience, darkness / a darkness, injustice / an injustice, room / a room

- Examples: a) The history of Canada must include Indigenous Peoples. (*Refers to the*

*abstract concept of history as the study of past events.)*

b) He has a history of getting caught cheating at university. (*Refers to a specific story within a limited timeframe and at a specific location.*)

**Words that can be either adjectives or determiners\*:** few / a few, little / a little, lots / a lot

\*Although these are not nouns, they are included here because of the way they use articles.

Examples: a) There are a few children in the class who will not come on the trip. (*Refers to a part of a larger group.*)

b) There are few children in the class. (*Refers to the total number of the group.*)

The categories provided here have been adapted from the University of Washington's International and English Language Program's online resource site (Nell Sorensen, 2011).

### Common two-way nouns with examples

Noun	Count Form	Noncount Form
aid	When I broke my leg, I used crutches as an aid to help me walk.	The Canadian government gives aid to nations in need.
analysis	She performed an analysis of the factors that led to the revolution.	Analysis is a critical component of a university essay.
coffee	I have already had a coffee today.	I drink coffee every morning.
education	She received an education at Queen's University.	The government decided to increase funding for education.
light	There is a light coming from that direction that we should follow.	There was just enough light to see the figure standing across the room.
quality	The house has a quality about it that makes it feel cozy.	The furniture in the house is excellent quality; it's all handmade.
room	There is a room in this house with beautiful stained glass windows.	There is not enough room in this car for all of our boxes.
space	I need to find a space to store my drum set.	This room does not have enough space for my drum set.
speed	The car is travelling at an incredibly fast speed.	The car needs more speed to win the race.
time	There was a time when I could play piano very well, but I am out of practice now.	I don't think we'll have enough time to finish this today.

### References

Nell Sorensen, Mary. (2011). "Count and Non-Count Nouns." *University of Washington: Mary Nell's Homepage*. <<https://staff.washington.edu/marynell/grammar/noncount.html>>, (24 September 2018).