



Ms. Particular Presents: Mass, Count, and Collective Nouns

Celia M. Elliott
Department of Physics
University of Illinois



© 2020 Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois
All rights reserved.

1

Count nouns are those that name things that are discrete, individual units

Examples: problem, particle, occurrence, sample, capacitor, collision, calculation, analysis

Count nouns can be modified by a number (one atom, 50 000 collisions per ms, 24 sensors, a dozen apples)

Count nouns may be singular or plural

Singular count nouns can take an indefinite article (*a* or *an*)

Count nouns may be modified by a *quantifier* (e.g., *every, each, several, many, few*)

2

Mass nouns are those that name things that are treated as undifferentiated units

Examples: flour, water, equipment, evidence, knowledge, research, jargon, physics, damage, information, work, advice, progress, stuff

Mass nouns are indivisible; they are almost always* expressed as a singular in English and take a singular verb

Although they are treated as singular, mass nouns cannot take an indefinite article (*a* or *an*)

Mass nouns cannot be modified by most *quantifiers* (e.g., *many*, *few*, *several*, *each*)

Some mass nouns (those that can be weighed or measured) can be modified by a number if a unit of measure is specified (2 kg of flour, 3 ml of water)

It's English—there are **always exceptions*

3

A mass noun is a *grammatical* construct

Whether a noun is a mass noun has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the object or objects to which the noun refers

***car, truck, SUV, motorcycle, freeway, lane* (count nouns)**

***traffic* (mass noun)**

***transportation* (mass noun)**

***rush hour* (mass noun)**



4

Dividing a mass noun into its constituent parts requires adding another word or using a completely different word*

clothing → **article of clothing; shirt, dress**

equipment → **piece of equipment; microscope, drill press**

pollution → **pollutant, heavy metal**

literature → **article, monograph, book, poem**

text → **letters, words, phrase, sentence, page, chapter**

research → **experiment, project, study, investigation, calculation, analysis**

note that the words for the parts are *count nouns

5

Common mistake—making mass nouns plural (which changes the meaning)

damage (mass) = physical harm that impairs an object's value, usefulness, or normal function

damages (mass) = a sum of money claimed or awarded by a court to compensate a victim for a loss or injury

text (mass) = the collection of words on a page or screen

texts (count) = individual books or manuscripts
(think textbooks)

work (mass) = activity involving mental or physical effort

works (count) = individual products of human (usually artistic) endeavor—think *works of art*—OR an industrial complex or engineering structure (*steelworks*)
OR (mass) an internal mechanism (the *works of a watch*)

6

Common mistake—using the wrong modifier

“Suppressing epidemics with a limited ~~amount~~ of immunization units”

units are counted; should be number

“Quantum, classical, and total ~~amount~~ of correlations in a quantum state”

correlations are counted; should be number

“Nonlinear optics with ~~less~~ than one photon”

photons are counted; should be fewer than
(how can you have less than one photon?)

(all titles from PRL articles, <sigh>)

7

Use the correct modifier!

Mass Nouns

no indefinite articles (*a* or *an*)

more than

less than (weighed or measured)

amount of (weighed or measured)

as much as (weighed or measured)

Count Nouns

can take any article

more than

fewer than (counted)

number of (counted)

as many as (counted)

Writing “The Raman studies showed the effects of varying excitation energies on the type and amount of defects in graphene” is not strictly wrong, and people will understand what you mean, but it sounds witless. *Defects* are counted, not weighed or measured.

8

A *collective* noun refers to a collection of things taken as a whole

Examples: audience, committee, faculty, ensemble, class, team, array, group, bunch

Most collective nouns are treated as singular in US English and take singular verbs and singular pronouns

*The committee nominates the club's officers.
The committee tabled its discussion of the budget.*

If the members of a group are not acting in unison, plural verbs and pronouns might be used

*The committee are fighting among themselves.
The committee adjourned to stretch their legs.*

Collective nouns can be mass (*audience*) or count (*team*)

9

Some words may be used as both mass and count nouns, but their meanings are different



chicken (count noun—animal)



chicken (mass noun—foodstuff)

10

Some words may be used as both mass and collective nouns, but their meanings are different



faculty (mass noun—professors)



faculties (collective noun—person's senses or intellect)

11

To recap:

Most mass nouns are treated as singular in English and take a singular verb

Making a mass noun plural may completely change the meaning of the word (e. g., damage, damages)

Add another word or use a completely different word to name parts of a mass noun

Collective nouns are usually treated as singular in US English usage (they're plural in British English)

Use the right modifier!



cmelliot@illinois.edu

<http://physics.illinois.edu/people/Celia/>

12