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Countable and uncountable nouns are one of the first things many students learn, but even advanced English speakers can find themselves in trouble with this complicated bit of grammar. How do you make sure you're getting it right in your scientific manuscripts?

Telling the difference

To start with, how do you check if a noun is countable or uncountable? There are no absolute rules, so it's a good study habit to make a note each time you learn a new noun.

However, there are some categories that are more likely to be uncountable:

- Liquids, gases, grains and powders, for example: water, air, sand, rice.
- Abstract nouns, for example: truth, freedom, courage.
- Emotions, experiences and states of being, like: anger, sleep, safety.
- Group nouns, or any noun that applies to a whole category of things, like: food, furniture, equipment.
- Subjects and professional fields, such as: biology, marketing, linguistics.
- Information is uncountable, and so are words that mean similar things: research, data, news, advice, and knowledge.

If you're still not sure, try putting a number in front of the word and see if it makes sense.

Only countable nouns can be used with a number. It's correct to say 10 planets, 15 fossils or 20 experiments, but wrong to say 10 air, 15 blood or 20 energy.

Choosing the right expression

Using countable and uncountable nouns correctly means using the right quantifiers. You can remember the most common quantifiers for uncountable nouns using the acronym

MALL: Much, Any, Little, Less. These are the words you will use to talk about Not having much information, only a little light was visible or a plant that uses less water.

Quantifiers for countable nouns use the acronym **MAFF: Many, Any, Few, Fewer**. There are used in expression like Many people on the trial lost weight, or There are fewer cars being made than 10 years ago.

The quantifiers Some, A bit of and a lot of can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns.

When reviewing your work for mistakes, ask yourself:

– Have I used plural verbs with uncountable nouns?

Uncountable nouns always use the singular form of the verb, e.g., There is new research in this field, Poverty leads to greater problems.

– Have I used a/an with uncountable nouns?

The definite article can only be used with countable nouns. For example, always write "We have new information" and not "We have a new information".

Exceptions to the rules

Some words can be both countable or uncountable, depending on the sentence. Work out which to use by thinking about whether the word is for one thing or represents a general idea. For example, light is a countable noun when you are talking about a lamp, but uncountable when you mean the energy coming from the sun. A shop or restaurant is a countable form of a business, but when you have a lot of customers you get the uncountable kind of business.

If you need to make an uncountable word countable, you can put a countable noun in front of it, like a glass of water, a set of data or a box of equipment. This should be familiar to Mandarin speakers, since it works the same way as noun classifiers like 个 or 本.

Dealing with countable and uncountable nouns can be very frustrating, but the more you practice the more you will be able to tell when something 'sounds right'. Soon you will feel confident that you know exactly what you're doing.