

## 1.2c Mass and Count Nouns

**key words:** nouns, parts of speech, mass and count nouns

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1a, Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/a>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1c, Use abstract nouns (e.g., *childhood*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/c>

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All languages have a distinction between nouns that are countable (count nouns) and those that are not (mass nouns). Count nouns refer to things that are discrete units, while mass nouns refer to unbounded masses. For example, the **count noun** *toad* is used to denote individual toads, but *rice* cannot be used to denote individual “rices,” so *rice* is a **mass noun**.

mass nouns: mud, mail, information

count nouns: frog, idea, shoe

And there are some handy tests to distinguish these. Count nouns can be pluralized and they can occur with numbers or other words that express quantities: *one*, *both*, *many*, etc. Mass nouns, can't be pluralized, can't be counted, and occur with *much* or *less*. (But both mass and count nouns can occur with *the*, *all*, and *some*.)

Take some nouns and try them out. Can the noun be pluralized? (If so, it's a count noun.) Can it occur with *a*? (If so, it's a count noun.) Can it occur with *much*? (If so, it's a mass noun.) Did you find any nouns that work both ways, like *light*? (I turned on two lights. There is not much light in this room.)

Determine whether the following nouns are mass nouns, count nouns, or both? Be prepared to provide evidence for your answer.

gerbil

sheep

food

homework

freedom

sky

neighborhood

water

[Teacher note: In general, *less* is used with mass nouns, while *fewer* is used with count nouns. But *less* has long been used with count nouns too, in fact. Many a grocery store sign says “10 Items or Less,” and although some people get upset about it, *less* has been used with countable things ever since English was English. Apparently, King Alfred (the Great) who was a staunch defender of English used it that way in his writings, way back in the 800s. And we've seen it ever since.]

[See lesson 1.2a on irregular plurals.]