

# Two-Way or Double Nouns

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

## What is meant by count and non-count 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 non-count noun cannot be counted. It does not take an indefinite article (a / an).**  
*Yesterday, I received mail. (Mail is a non-count noun; while we cannot count mail in general, we can count pieces of mail.)*

For more information about article use with count and non-count nouns, refer to the SASS writing handout, [Articles with count and non-count 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 non-count. Consider the following examples:

### Animals that are also considered food

fish / a fish, duck / a duck, bison / a bison

Examples:

- I had moose for dinner while visiting my Cree relatives. (*Refers to the food.*)
- 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:

- The house is made out of straw. (*Refers to the material.*)
- 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:

- I love ice cream in the summer. (*Refers to the general food category.*)
- 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:

- I bought a new shampoo from the salon. (*“Kind of / type of” is implied.*)
- 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:

- The history of Canada must include Indigenous Peoples. (*Refers to the abstract concept of history as the study of past events.*)
- He has a history of getting caught cheating at university. (*Refers to a specific story within a limited time frame 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:

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

**aid**

- Count: When I broke my leg, I used crutches as **an aid** to help me walk.
- Non-count: The Canadian government gives **aid** to nations in need.

**analysis**

- Count: She performed **an analysis** of the factors that led to the revolution.
- Non-count: **Analysis** is a critical component of a university essay.

**coffee**

- Count: I have already had **a coffee** today.
- Non-count: I drink **coffee** every morning.

## education

- Count: She received **an education** at Queen's University.
- Non-count: The government decided to increase funding for **education**.

## light

- Count: There is **a light** coming from that direction that we should follow.
- Non-count: There was just enough **light** to see the figure standing across the room.

## quality

- Count: The house has **a quality** about it that makes it feel cozy.
- Non-count: The furniture in the house is excellent **quality**; it's all handmade.

## room

- Count: There is **a room** in this house with beautiful stained glass windows.
- Non-count: There is not enough **room** in this car for all of our boxes.

## space

- Count: I need to find **a space** to store my drum set.
- Non-count: This room does not have enough **space** for my drum set.

## speed

- Count: The car is travelling at **an** incredibly fast **speed**.
- Non-count: The car needs more **speed** to win the race.

## time

- Count: There was **a time** when I could play piano very well, but I am out of practice now.
- Non-count: 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](#).