

## 5 Collective noun–verb agreement

Collective nouns refer to a group of people, animals or things, e.g. *family, government, group, staff, team, band, class*. A large number of proper nouns fall into this category, e.g. *the United Nations, British Airways, Microsoft Corporation*. We can usually use a singular or plural verb after these nouns. The choice can depend on how we think of the noun:

	SINGULAR VERB	PLURAL VERB
collective noun seen as a whole entity	<i>The family has a monthly income of \$2,000.</i>	
collective noun seen as a group of individuals		<i>The family are all gathering here for New Year.</i>
a + collective noun	<i>A team of inspectors is visiting the prison tomorrow.</i>	

We always use a plural verb for

- certain collective nouns, e.g. *police, people, cattle*:  
*The police are investigating his accusation of fraud.*
- an adjective used as a collective noun (► Unit 12.5):  
*The middle-aged have a lot to offer employers.*
- nouns such as *the majority/a number/a couple + of + plural noun*:  
*The majority of the people were pleased to see the government fall.*

## 6 Countable and uncountable nouns

Some nouns can be countable or uncountable, but have different meanings:

COUNTABLE MEANING	UNCOUNTABLE MEANING
<i>I'd love a coffee,<sup>1</sup> please. (= a cup)</i>	<i>Do you drink coffee? (= the liquid)</i>
<i>I'll buy a chicken<sup>2</sup> for dinner tonight. (= the whole bird)</i>	<i>Would you like some chicken for dinner? (= a part/the dish)</i>
<i>This is an amazing drawing<sup>2</sup> by Leonardo. (= a picture)</i>	<i>My son is very good at drawing. (= the activity)</i>
<i>Someone threw a stone<sup>2</sup> at our window. (= one item)</i>	<i>The road crosses a flat landscape of scrub and stone. (= the material)</i>

<sup>1</sup> This applies to all drinks: *tea/a tea, cola/a cola, lemonade/a lemonade*

<sup>2</sup> Not all nouns of these types can be both countable and uncountable:

X *a beef, a mutton* ✓ *a duck/duck, a fish/fish, a lamb/lamb*  
 X *an art, a poetry* ✓ *a painting/painting, a sculpture/sculpture*  
 X *a wool, a cotton* ✓ *a paper/paper, a rock/rock*

## 7 Quantifying uncountable nouns

We can use words like *piece* and *bit* to make some uncountable nouns countable:

*The Council will remove **two pieces of unwanted furniture** if desired.*

Other common nouns used in this way are: *a slice of bread/meat/cheese/cake; an item of news/furniture/clothing; a lump of sugar/coal; a cup of coffee/tea, a pair of trousers/jeans.*

We can sometimes make an uncountable noun countable to express 'different types' of the noun:

*Our new skincare cream contains several essential **oils**.*

*This is **a soft cheese** from the Pyrenees.*

We can use articles with uncountable abstract nouns to refer to a specific feeling:

*distrust* → *a deep distrust, a distrust of lawyers*    *love* → *an everlasting love, the love of music*

When we use nouns in this way, we use a singular verb:

*A **love of fashion and music** is common amongst teenagers.*