Count and Noncount Nouns

Nouns can be separated into two basic categories: count and noncount.

- **Count** nouns refer to a singular entity.
  - Examples: tree, car, book, airplane, fork, wall, desk, shirt
- **Noncount** nouns refer to either an undifferentiated mass or an abstract idea that, as the name implies, cannot be counted.
  - Examples: wood, sugar, justice, purity, milk, water, furniture, joy, mail, news, luggage, coal

There are several ways to differentiate between the two classes of nouns.

- While both types of nouns can be designated by the definite article the, only count nouns can be used with the indefinite article a.
  - Example: You can say both a car and the car, but you can only say the sugar, and not a sugar.
- Only count nouns can be plural.
  - Examples: roads, groups, guitars; but not milks, mails, furnitures.
  - Note that a few nouns can be used as either count or noncount. Wood, as a building or burning material, is a noncount noun (the clause “the monastery was built of woods” doesn’t make any sense). But when the word refers to forest(s), it is a count noun.
- Count nouns can also combine with certain determiners, such as one, two, these, several, many, few.
  - Note: Determiners are words that precede nouns. Some describe the quantity of a noun (like those above), while others describe whether a noun is specific or not.
- On the other hand, noncount nouns combine only with other determiners, such as this, some, most, all.
  - Note that count nouns can be used with this, some, most, and all as well.
- Count nouns will almost always be combined with a determiner, whereas noncount nouns will commonly be used without any determiners.

As the name suggests, most noncount nouns cannot be physically counted.

- We cannot separate water, wine, or juice into their separate parts, but we can define them using other measurements
  - Examples: seven deciliters of wine, eight hundred grams of water, four hundred milliliters of juice.
  - Note the usage: we can quantify a noncount by combining it with a count noun (using the preposition of).
The words *fewer* and *less* are commonly misused in the English language. Their usage depends on whether the modified noun is count or noncount.

- Always use *fewer* with count nouns.
  - Examples: There are *fewer* students in the class than last week. One serving contains *fewer* than 100 calories.
  - Despite what you might see at the checkout counter (*10 Items or Less!*), *less* should only be used to modify noncount nouns.
  - Examples: Our nation must use *less* coal and crude oil. John has *less* hate in his heart than he did ten years ago.
- Exception: Use *less than* to modify count nouns that indicate a measure of time, amount, or distance.
  - Examples: I leave in *less than* two weeks. She had *less than* ten dollars in the bank.

(Source: Kolln & Funk. *Understanding English Grammar. 7th ed.*)

**Practice**
Determine whether the noun in the blank is countable or uncountable. What are the cues you're using to determine your answer?

1. My lunch box contained approximately 23 __________.
2. The gasoline mixture contained precisely 4 liters of __________.
3. __________ is a new substance that can be used to cleanse contaminated water.
4. The __________ are going to play a show in Portland tonight.
5. In these types of situations, it is good to have a __________.

Determine whether to use *fewer* or *less* with the following nouns.

1. You have *fewer/less* days to complete this assignment than the last.
2. There are no *fewer/less* products left on the shelf after a sale.
3. There's *fewer/less* respect in the world since I was a kid.
4. When I talk to him, I feel *fewer/less* pity than I did before.
5. A limited time offer! Buy any five items for *fewer/less* than 100 dollars!
6. I have gone to the store *fewer/less* times than he.


**Key2:** 1. fewer 2. fewer 3. less 4. less 5. less 6. fewer