Section 14  nouns

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The purpose of the illustrations is just to introduce the topic. No activity is necessary.

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language notes
Dropping plural -(e)s is quite a common mistake.
  *I have two younger brother.  *I needed both hand to lift it.
This can happen for several reasons. The student’s mother tongue may not have distinct plural forms. Final -s may be difficult to pronounce after a consonant, or in all cases, for students whose languages have different phonetic structures from English (e.g. Spanish, Chinese or Thai speakers); sounds which are not pronounced are also easily dropped in writing.

The pronunciation of plural -(e)s depends on what comes before it:
– /s/ after an unvoiced sound like /p/, /k/ or /t/
– /z/ after a vowel or a voiced consonant like /b/, /g/, /d/, /m/, /l/ etc
– /ɪz/ after /s/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/.

The distinction between /s/ and /z/ is unimportant except for learners who want a very high level of accuracy in pronunciation, but students should be clear about when to pronounce the ending /ɪz/.

possible further activities
Pronunciation  If you want to practise the pronunciation of plural -(e)s, say the words in the lists of regular nouns, in random order, and ask students to say the plurals.

Plural formation  When you have worked through the lesson, ask students to close their books and write five plurals ending in -ies, five other regular plurals ending in -es, five other regular plurals ending in -s, and five irregular plurals.

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language notes
The point about group nouns having plural verbs (e.g. The team are playing badly) is mostly relevant to British English; this happens much less often in American English.

Some English plurals may have singular equivalents in students’ languages:
  *I need to buy a new jean.
  *Have you got a scissor(s)?

possible further activities
Internet  Invite students to check on the internet to see whether they can find examples of the team, my family and the audience followed by are or have.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.  ➔ Section 14 continues
language notes

The difference between countable and uncountable nouns (important for several aspects of English grammar) is difficult for speakers of some languages to grasp.

*We must put a petrol in the car.
*I haven't got much friend.

It may not be enough to explain that it depends on whether things ‘can be counted’ or not. There are languages in which counting works in the same way for both kinds of noun, with structures equivalent to ‘three pieces of wood’ and ‘three pieces of car’, for example (only more complicated than that!). It’s probably better to talk about whether things naturally come as separate items or not.

The distinction is also often arbitrary – compare rice and lentils, or wheat and oats, or gravel and pebbles. And abstract nouns often have both countable and uncountable uses. Such cases are not important at this level. However, it’s helpful for students to know about the double use of many words for consumables (see Exercise 5). And speakers of European languages need to know that some common uncountable words may be countable in their mother tongues (see Exercise 2):

*Can you give me an advice?
*I'm going to buy some new furnitures.

possible further activities

Countables and uncountables: finding examples  Ask students if they can find five each of countable singular, countable plural and uncountable nouns in advertisements, song titles, reports or other sources.

What kind of noun?  Extend Exercise 2: say a series of nouns; students repeat them, putting a or an before the singular countables and some before the others. Like this:

‘table’ – ‘a table’
‘butter’ – ‘some butter’
‘chairs’ – ‘some chairs’
‘coat’ – ‘a coat’
‘make-up’ – ‘some make-up’
‘problems’ – ‘some problems’
‘exam’ – ‘an exam’

Keep it going quickly, but not so fast that the students get confused.

Containers  Extend Exercise 4 and work on vocabulary. Give the names of some things or substances; discuss the possible words for containers, teaching new ones where necessary. Then get students to write appropriate expressions. (‘a packet of butter’ ‘a can/tin of peas’ ‘a barrel of oil’ ‘a bucket of water’)

The differences between words like tin, box and packet can be tricky. There is a very useful illustration in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (8th edition, page V29).

Containers: finding examples  Ask students if they can find more illustrations like those in Exercise 4, label them (‘a … of …’) and bring them to class.

Price survey  Give students a list of ten or so ‘shopping’ items (e.g. a kilo of onions, a large packet of washing powder, a litre of milk, a loaf of bread, a 500g packet of rice, a bunch of roses, a litre of petrol, a 500g jar of instant coffee, a cheap pair of trainers). Get them, perhaps in groups, to estimate how much the items cost and arrange them in order, from most to least expensive. Afterwards they check up (in shops or on the internet) and see who was closest to the truth. (In a mixed class, it would be amusing to do this as a competition between girls and boys, or men and women.)
language notes

The grammar of the substitute word one is quite complicated, and students can easily get confused:

*I would like a one with a big garden.

They may also drop the article after with in this structure (see page 163):

… one with big garden.

Note that Spanish-speaking beginners may use ones as a plural indefinite article (Spanish unos – ‘some’):

*I would like ones strawberries.

possible further activities

‘A … one’ Ask students ‘What sort of … would you like?’, using singular countable nouns. They say or write ‘A … one’. (‘What sort of holiday would you like?’ ‘A long one.’) Possible nouns (depending on age etc): car, house, grandchild, job, boyfriend/girlfriend, garden.

‘Ones’ Ask students ‘What sort of … do you like?’, using plural nouns. They answer ‘… ones.’

‘One with …’ Ask students ‘What sort of house would you like?’ They answer ‘One with …’

language notes

The correct spelling of possessive nouns (father’s, parents’, children’s) is difficult for many native speakers, and mistakes are common. On a menu recently we saw the following words (beautifully systematic, but wrong!)

coffee’s tea’s cake’s

On the same menu we found:

drinks sandwiches fillings supplements

Can you see what their system was?

possible further activities

Visual punctuation Say some nouns (mixed singular, plural and irregular plural). Keep to nouns for people. Students add the possessive endings by drawing them in the air, like this:

sister – students draw apostrophe s

doctors – students draw apostrophe s

childrens – students draw apostrophe s

20 questions: whose? Think of something that belongs to somebody in the class. The students have to discover what it is, asking no more than 20 questions; you can only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It helps if you suggest some useful questions in advance, explaining vocabulary where necessary. For example:

Is it in this room?

Is it a part of the body?

Is it manufactured?

Is it useful?

Is it bigger than a …?

When they think they’ve got it, they ask for example ‘Is it Anna’s bike?’ or ‘Is it Mario’s nose?’ Once you’ve demonstrated, it can be done in groups.

Chains of possessives Get students to make chains like the ones in Exercise 3, with at least five possessives. Who can make the longest? (The possessives should all be different nouns for people.)

➔ Section 14 continues
language notes

The differences between the three common ways of putting nouns together, practised on these and the following pages, are complex – this is one of the most messy areas of English grammar. (Compare *dog’s leg, table leg, leg of lamb.*) Typical mistakes:

*the John's house * the ears of my wife *my house’s front

At this level we simply teach the central uses of the three structures.

possible further activities

*Extending Exercise 3* Give students pairs of nouns. They put them together using a possessive or the of structure as appropriate. Like this:

‘Anna + nose’ ‘Anna’s nose’
‘the mountain + top’ ‘top of the mountain’
‘the road + end’ ‘end of the road’
‘doctor + house’ ‘the doctor’s house’

*Time* Ask students to write estimates of the time necessary for journeys and/or pieces of work (putting apostrophes in the right place). Like this:

‘writing an email’ – ‘three minutes’ work’
‘building a house’ – ‘six months’ work’
‘going from Rome to Bologna’ – ‘four hours’ drive’
‘going from London to Sydney’ – ‘twenty hours’ flight’.

language notes

Students may have trouble forming and using expressions like *racehorse* and *horse race*, or getting the words in the right order, if their language puts nouns before modifying expressions:

*We have a meeting of business tomorrow.*
*I don’t like soup fish.*

They may also make the first noun plural, which is unusual in English:

*shoes shop*

possible further activities

*Finding examples; vocabulary expansion* Ask students how many noun + noun combinations they can find in the classroom, or think of in a typical house or town. (‘computer table’ ‘wall poster’ ‘light switch’ ‘kitchen door’ ‘soup spoon’ ‘clothes shop’ …). Ask them to find ten or more noun + noun combinations in advertisements for food or drink.