



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

Editing for Noun Errors

One of the easiest errors for ESL students to fix in their writing is singular/ plural errors with nouns.

Noun Problems

As you edit your writing, you need to check for four noun problems:

1. Check each noun to decide if it is Plural or Singular or Uncountable.
2. Check for consistency of plural/singular usage.
3. Check that each singular noun has a determiner.
4. Check that each singular subject agrees with present tense verbs.

This handout will explain each of these error types.

1. Plural or Singular?

If you decide a noun should be plural, make sure it has a plural form

- "s" for most nouns, and plural forms for irregular nouns such as "*people*," "*children*," "*feet*," and "*women*".

Useful Advice:

- Plural nouns lead to fewer errors so make your nouns plural whenever possible.

Countable or Uncountable?

ESL students often have trouble with two kinds of uncountable nouns:

- a. English has many “group” or “category” words which are not countable, such as equipment, furniture, grammar, research, vocabulary, garbage, advice. To learn more about these words, ask for the Learning Centre “Noncount Nouns” handout (GR1.40), or do an internet search to find more information about uncountable nouns in English.
- b. English has many abstract words that can be count in some situations and noncount in other situations (such as “*culture*,” “*society*,” and “*experience*”). Often, it is safe to treat these words as uncountable nouns.
 - However, the most convenient step to take when you are not sure is to look up the word in a good learners’ dictionary (ESL dictionary) to find out in which situations the word is used in a countable way and in which situations the word is used in an uncountable way. A good online dictionary is:
www.ldoceonline.com
 - Another good editing step is to ask a native speaker how to use any specific abstract word you are not sure how to use.

For editing, remember that noncount nouns are treated as singular nouns for subject verb agreement and for pronoun reference. See the example below.

Subject Verb Agreement for uncountable nouns:

*“Although most of the office equipment **is** more than five years old, **it** still works well.”*

Notice in the example that, when using a pronoun to refer back to noncount noun, you should use “it” rather than “they.”

2. Plural/Singular Consistency

A frequent error in ESL writing is a switch between plural and singular meanings of the same noun in sentences and paragraphs. So, if the nouns at the beginning of a sentence are plural, make sure reference to the same nouns later in the sentence continues as plural.

Example with weak plural/singular consistency:

Students should read the textbook before class. This preparation helps the student understand the lecture better.

Revised sentence with improve plural consistency:

Students should read their textbooks before their classes. This preparation helps students understand their lectures better.

3. Singular Nouns must have Determiners

As you carefully check your nouns to decide if they are plural, singular, or uncountable, you also need to make sure each singular noun has the correct grammar in the words around it. Because plural nouns lead to fewer errors, it is safest to make as many nouns as possible plural in your writing.

With singular nouns, you need to check for two kinds of problems:

- determiners/articles

A frequent error in ESL writing is missing determiners on singular nouns. The articles “a,” “an,” and “the” are three possible determiners you can use.

Plural and uncountable nouns sometimes have determiners and sometimes they don't. However, all singular nouns must have determiners.

The rule is simple: **If a noun is singular, it must have a determiner.**

- Determiners can be classified as:
 - Specifiers
 - “th” specifiers (the, this, that)
 - possessive specifiers (my, your, her, his, Mary’s, etc.)
 - Quantifiers (a/an, one, any, each, every, either, neither, no, etc.)
- 4. Each singular subject must “agree” with its verb if the verb is in the present tense

Another singular noun error is subject/verb agreement. This error is a concern primarily in present tense sentences because agreement errors seldom happen in other tenses (the only exception is past tense “be” verbs → *was, were*).

Other Exercises and Resources

Learning Centre Handouts:

GR1.20	Editing for Articles
GR1.40	Noncount Nouns

Exercises in Books in the Learning Centre:

- G1.08 Asher, A. (1993). Think about editing: A grammar editing guide for ESL writers. “Unit Five: Determiners.” Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- G1.13 Azar, B.S. (1999). Fundamentals of English grammar. (3d ed.). Chapter 7 “Nouns.” Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.