

Mistakes with articles, nouns, and pronouns

NOUNS WITH IDENTICAL SINGULAR AND PLURAL FORMS

When we mention irregular plural forms in English, “children”, “men”, and “women” are three examples that spring to mind, but there are many more nouns whose plural is not formed by adding -s or -es. Among these, some of the most perplexing are those that do not change at all to form the plural.

Let’s go through some of the most important ones (a few more will be treated later when we speak about nouns that end in -s in their singular form), always with an example sentence to help you remember the correct form:

- **aircraft, hovercraft, spacecraft**, and other “-craft” vehicles
There are two aircraft prepared for landing.
- **bison**: *The bison were grazing in the distance.*
- **cod**: *The cod are known to migrate in large numbers.*
- **deer**: *Deer are an easy prey for wolves.*
- **fish**: *Three fish swim in the fish tank.*
- **moose**: *Moose actually belong to the deer family.*
- **offspring**: *The fox gave birth to five offspring.*
- **pike**: *The pike are big freshwater predatory fish.*
- **salmon**: *Salmon are often seen jumping over dangerous waterfalls.*

- **sheep:** *One sheep, two sheep, three sheep...*
- **shrimp:** *Shrimp are among the most commonly eaten animals.*
- **trout:** *The trout are fish related to the salmon.*

Note that many species of fish were left out from the list. Referring to fish using the same singular and plural form is extremely common, but actual usage varies somewhat among different regions, so it is advisable to consult a dictionary when writing about a particular species.

Also note that the names of animals mentioned above are sometimes used in the plural to refer to several species bearing the same name, for example:

The diversity of the reef's fishes [fish species] is threatened by human activity.

Furthermore, there are a few nouns that can take either regular or irregular plural forms:

- **boar:** *He saw several boar(s) in the woods.*
- **buffalo:** *I hope there aren't too many buffalo(e)(s) outside.*
- **swine:** The plural is "swine" when referring to pigs, e.g. "*Swine are reared extensively in Europe.*" When referring to people, the plural may be also "swines", e.g. "*Those swines spilled their drinks on my couch and now it's all dirty.*"

Also note that many adjectives used to describe a nation or an ethnic group can be used as plural nouns (often with "the"), e.g.

*The British are notorious in Europe for their terrible cuisine.
They could learn a lot from the French.
Nevertheless, most Chinese enjoy a different kind of cuisine.*

IRREGULAR PLURAL PATTERNS

Many words of Latin and Greek origin retain their original plural endings (i.e. the plurals are not formed by adding -s or -es). It is often impossible to tell the correct plural form of a word without knowing its etymology. Rather than memorizing long lists of irregular plurals, you should be aware of the existing patterns to be able to recognize them when you see a new word. The most common patterns are:

|||| -us → -i: *nucleus: nuclei; alumnus: alumni; stimulus: stimuli.*

Note that for many such words, both -i and -uses are acceptable, for example: cactus – cacti/cactuses, focus – foci/focuses.

|||| -is → -es: *axis: axes; analysis: analyses; oasis: oases; thesis: theses.*

Note: -is is pronounced /ɪs/, -es is pronounced /i:z/.

|||| -ix → -ices: *appendix: appendices; index: indices; matrix: matrices.*

Note: Both -ices and -ixes are often acceptable, for example index – indices/indexes.

|||| -um → -a: *bacterium: bacteria; medium: media; datum: data.*

Note: “data” and “media” are often treated as singular mass nouns in modern English.

|||||| -on → -a: *criterion: criteria; phenomenon: phenomena.*

|||||| -us → -*ra: *corpus: corpora; genus: genera.*

|||||| -a → -ae: *nebula: nebulae; vertebra: vertebrae.*

Note: Often both -ae and -as are acceptable: antenna – antennae/antennas; formula – formulae/formulas.

Furthermore, there are a few patterns which are not of Latin or Greek origin:

- oo- → -ee-: *foot: feet; goose: geese; tooth: teeth.*
- ouse → ice: *mouse: mice; louse: lice.*

Note also the noun “ox” whose plural is “oxen”.

SINGULAR NOUNS ENDING IN ‘S’

Many English nouns end with an “s” in their singular form. Most of these don’t pose any problem; few people would say “these kiss were beautiful” instead of “these kisses”. However, there are a few that are commonly misunderstood as being plural by learners:

news

Although the equivalent expression in many languages would be in the plural, “news” is a singular noun, so you would say:

- The news is being broadcast by all major TV stations. (correct)*
- The news are being broadcast by all major TV stations. (wrong)*

Oddly enough, “news” is uncountable, which means that not only do we use a singular verb after it, but you can’t say “a news”:

- I’ve got good news. (correct)*
- I’ve got a good news. (wrong)*

lens

Unlike “news”, “lens” is countable, so you can try to remember that if there can be “two lenses”, there must also be “one lens”:



His new lens is big. (correct)
His new lens are big. (wrong)

series

To make things even more confusing, the plural of “series” is also series. You should therefore use a singular verb if you speak about one particular series, e.g.



My favourite TV series has been cancelled.

and a plural verb if you speak about several series at a time, e.g.



All the series on the Unknown Channel are good.

means

Just like “series”, “means” is already both the singular and the plural form of the noun. For example:



Railway is a means [singular] of transportation, but there are also several other good means [plural] of transportation.

bellows

Bellows is an instrument used for blowing air. Like “series”, the plural of “bellows” is also “bellows”, so you have to use a singular verb when speaking about one bellows and a plural verb when speaking about more than one.

measles

Measles is a disease, and as you have probably noticed from the previous sentence, the word is in the singular:



Measles is especially common among children. (correct)
Measles are especially common among children. (wrong)

Quite naturally, it is uncountable, i.e. you cannot have “two measles”.

species

Species (pronounced /'spi:ʃi:z/, sometimes also /'spi:si:z/) is defined in biology as the largest group of organisms capable of interbreeding and producing a fertile offspring (although there are also exceptions to this definition). The plural is also “species”, e.g.

The domestic cat is a species [singular] of the Felidae family. The lion and the jaguar are two other species [plural] belonging to the same family.

Christmas

Christmas is a singular noun, and as such it takes a singular verb:

Christmas is a great time of year. (correct)
Christmas are a great time of year. (wrong)

chess

The game of chess is singular in English:

Chess is an intellectually demanding game. (correct)
Chess are an intellectually demanding game. (wrong)

NOUNS THAT ONLY EXIST IN THE PLURAL

Finally, to finish our exhausting discussion on unusual plural forms, let’s take a look at nouns that only have a plural form and may be therefore confusing for some learners if the equivalent expression in their mother tongue is in the singular:

jeans, tights, trousers, pants, panties

All this hosiery is used only in the plural, usually because they come in pairs (for both legs), and the singular form has died out:

Her new jeans/tights/trousers/pants/panties are black. (correct)

Her new jeans/tights/trousers/pants/panties is black. (wrong)

It is common to refer to these as a “pair”, for example:

I bought a new pair of jeans.

Note that the word “trousers” in British English means any kind of clothes worn from the waist down covering both legs separately, whereas the general term in the US is “pants” (and “trousers” is used only for specific kinds of “pants”). In British English “pants” means the same as “underpants” or “knickers”, i.e. a kind of underwear. These are commonly referred to also as “panties” in American English.

tongs, scissors, pliers, glasses, binoculars

Not to be confused with “thongs” (the plural of “thong” which is a type of underwear), tongs, a tool for gripping and lifting things, are also used in the plural, along with similar tools which come in pairs:

The tongs/scissors/pliers are not big enough. (correct)

The tongs/scissors/pliers is not big enough. (wrong)

Other nouns that somehow represent an inseparable pair also usually exist only in the plural, e.g. glasses, binoculars. Just like for hosiery, it is common to refer to all these using the word “pair”:

Peter has just got two new pairs of glasses.

Other examples

There are many other examples of nouns that exist only in the plural. Some of the more common are:

- **clothes** (not to be confused with cloths)
- **remains** (the rests of something)
- **goods** (items intended for sale)
- **stairs** (we say “one step” rather than “one stair”)
- **arms** (in the sense of “weapons”)
- **outskirts** (of a city)
- **shenanigans** (mischief, craziness, trickery)

ARE THINGS HE, SHE, OR IT?

Unlike most other European languages, Modern English has no grammatical genders. When we speak about an inanimate object, we always refer to it as “it”. For example:

- This is a stone. It is very heavy. (correct)*

This is a stone. He is very heavy. (wrong)

This is a flower. It is red. (correct)

This is a flower. She is red. (wrong)

Although animals are animate, an animal is also traditionally referred to as “it”, unless you want to emphasize its sex or your personal relationship with it:

- I saw a stray dog. It was large. (correct)*

I saw a stray dog. He/she was large. (see below)

In this case, since the animal’s sex doesn’t matter and we have no personal relationship with it, we would use “it”. Note, however, that it

is customary to refer to all animals as “he” or “she” in certain circles, especially among animal rights activists and vegans.

Nevertheless, most people would use “he” or “she” (depending on the sex of the animal) only when referring to an animal with whom they have a close personal relationship:

||||| *The dachshund is a member of our family. She is always so curious.*

Of course, using “it” is completely correct too:

||||| *The dachshund is a member of our family. It is always so curious.*

Sometimes things are referred to as “she” to show affection. It is traditional for ships to be a “she”:

||||| *What a ship! She’s been cruising the sea for fifty years and still looks like new.*

but it is not wrong to refer to a ship in an impersonal manner as “it”. Similarly, countries and cars are sometimes referred to as “she”:

||||| *I love Great Britain. She is beautiful.*
||||| *Let’s try out our new Ferrari. She’s ready for it.*

However, don’t overdo it. Even if you really love your Ferrari, referring to it always as “she” may make you sound pretentious or snobbish.

UNITED STATES IS/ARE

The United States has always been causing (grammatical) trouble... or *have* been? “The United States” was treated as a plural noun in most of the 19th century, but the usage shifted during the 20th century towards treating it as a singular noun.

In other words, we understand “The United States” as “the country consisting of united states” in modern English and use singular verbs after it, as in

- The United States has a very aggressive foreign policy. (correct)*
- The United States have a very aggressive foreign policy. (obsolete)*

We can see the singular United States also in the following witticism:

The United States invariably does the right thing, after having exhausted every other alternative.
— Winston Churchill

SEVERAL THOUSAND(S) OF

The words “hundred”, “thousand”, “million”, and so on, when they are used in counting objects, are *always in the singular* and usually not followed by “of”, for example

- There were two thousand people. (correct)*
- There were two thousands people. (wrong)*
- There were two thousands of people. (wrong)*

A number is only followed by “of” when we enumerate something else than a noun, for example:

- We ordered five hundred of these. (correct)*
- We ordered five hundred these. (wrong)*

Also note that, when speaking about the number of objects or people, we usually say “a hundred/thousand/million”, rather than “one hundred/thousand/million”.

The only case when “hundred”, “thousand”, etc., take the plural form is when they are used in the sense of “an unspecified number of hundreds/thousands/...”, e.g.

Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

—Susan Ertz

If there is a noun after “hundreds”, “thousands”, etc., we use “of”:

||||| *Thousands of people were left homeless after the floods.*

What do we do when we want to use “several”, “many”, “a few”, etc., instead of a number? Some speakers do say “several hundreds/thousands/... of” but the variant without “-s” and “of” is much more common and considered acceptable by all speakers, whereas the other variant is usually considered unnatural by those who don't use it. It is therefore advisable to stick to the singular form:

||||| *There were several thousand people. (correct)*
||||| *There were several thousands of people. (less natural)*

DOT, PERIOD, FULL STOP, POINT

These four terms can be quite confusing for native speakers of other languages because they usually don't correspond well to the terms used in their mother tongue.

The distinction is actually rather simple. The little dot which you can find at the end of a sentence is called *period* in American English and *full stop* in British English, even when you “pronounce” the full stop for emphasis; for example, a father arguing with his daughter could say:

You are not going out with Zack, period. [American English]

You are not going out with Zack, full stop. [British English]

The term *dot* is used when pronouncing the character in domain names; for example, “www.google.com” would be pronounced

“Double U double U double U dot google dot com”

A funny thing to notice here is that WWW is an abbreviation of “World Wide Web” that contains three times more syllables in its spoken form than the term it is supposed to abbreviate.

Finally, the term *point* refers to the dot used in numbers to separate the fractional part from the integer part (unlike many other languages, English uses a decimal point, not a decimal comma). The numbers after the decimal point are pronounced in isolation, e.g.

3.14 = “three point one four”

36.952 = “thirty six point nine five two”

0.25 = “zero point two five”, or just .25 = “point two five”

A COUPLE (OF)

Although it is quite common to hear expressions like “in a couple hours” and “I saw a couple people” in spoken American English (but not so much in British English), in formal written English (on both sides of the Atlantic), the form with “of” is the only one considered appropriate, for example:

We will leave in a couple of days. (correct)

We will leave in a couple days. (colloquial)

There is one phrase, however, in which “a couple” is always used without “of”, namely “a couple more”. For example:

I need a couple more cups of coffee. (correct)

I need a couple of more cups of coffee. (wrong)

IN/ON (THE) I/INTERNET

The English word “Internet” is problematic for English learners because it can cause several problems at once. First, when it is used as a noun describing *the* network we all use, it is used with the definite article:

I love the Internet! (correct)

I love Internet! (dubious)

I wrote “dubious” instead of “wrong” for the second option because some native speakers do use the noun without the article. However, most English speakers consider the first option to be the only correct one, so it is the one you should use.

The word “Internet” isn’t preceded by an article when it is used as an adjective in front of a noun that itself has no article, e.g.

Do you have Internet access? (correct)

Do you have the Internet access? (wrong)

The term “Internet access” is sometimes shortened to “Internet”, in which case we *don’t* use an article:

Do you have Internet? (correct, informal)

Do you have the Internet? (wrong)

The second sentence doesn’t make sense; you can’t *own* the Internet, but you can have Internet in the sense of Internet access.

Another problem is the preposition. When something is part of the Internet, we say that it is “on the Internet”, not “in” or “at” the Internet:

I didn't find the article on the Internet. (correct)

I didn't find the article in the Internet. (wrong)

As for whether you should capitalize “Internet”: It's hard to make a mistake here. Both “Internet” and “internet” are commonly used when referring to the network. Traditionally, “Internet” was considered a proper noun and written with a capital letter. Nowadays, the noun is considered to be a generic name, like “electricity” or “water supply”, and is commonly spelled “internet”, so:

You can surf the Internet. (correct, more traditional)

You can also surf the internet. (correct, more recent)

Some style guides prefer one spelling to the other, so if you are writing a text for someone else, you may want to check which style guide they follow.

SUB(S)TRACT

I have heard a lot of people using the word “substract” and its derived form “substraction”. Long story short, the correct forms are “**subtract**” and “**subtraction**” (without an “s”).

The reason why so many English learners make the mistake is probably that there is a corresponding word in many languages that does contain an “s”, e.g. *soustraire* in French or *sustraer* in Spanish. Another reason might be that learners confuse its sound with “abstract”, a relatively common word that contains the letter group “bstract”, not just “btract”.

YOU AND I/ME

Should you always write and say “you and I” and avoid “you and me”? Some native speakers will tell you so. Not only does no such rule exist, but using “you and I” instead of “you and me” is wrong in many cases.

The rule is quite simple, actually. If “you and I” is the subject of a sentence (i.e. “you and I” are the people who are doing the action), it is the correct form:

You and I are good friends. (correct)
You and me are good friends. (colloquial)

The second example is not *wrong* (it is widespread to use “you and me” this way); it’s just colloquial and should be avoided in formal speech and writing.

If “you and I” is an object (i.e. the people to *whom* something is being done), the correct form is “you and me”:

She didn’t see you and me. (correct)
She didn’t see you and I. (wrong)

A simple mnemonic is to say “he” or “him” instead of “you”. Would you say “she didn’t see him and I”? I don’t think so.

Native speakers are usually taught they shouldn’t use “you and me” as the subject of a sentence in formal writing. Many of these misunderstand the rule as “never use you and me” and even “correct” other people who say, for example, “she sees you and me”, claiming it should be “she sees you and I”.

You may safely ignore such “advice”. It is possible that “you and I” as an object will become so widespread to be considered an acceptable variant in the future, but it is certainly not acceptable now.

ALL/ANYTHING/EVERYTHING BUT

These three expressions are among the most confusing in the English language for native speakers of other languages. Although “all”, “everything” and “anything” are all similar in meaning, when they are followed with “but”, they mean completely different things!

All but

“All but” means (completely illogically, I agree) “almost”, “nearly”. For example,

He was all but lost in the city.

It was all but impossible.

could be expressed without using “all but” as

He was almost lost in the city.

It was nearly impossible.

Anything but

“Anything but” can be rephrased using “not at all” or “in no way”. For example,

They were anything but positive about the proposition.

This smartphone is anything but ordinary.

which means the same as

They were not at all positive about the proposition.

This smartphone is in no way ordinary.

Everything but

The meaning of “everything but” is quite literal; it is synonymous with “everything except”, “everything with the exception of”. For example,

I eat everything but meat.
She wants everything but happiness for other people.

which means

I eat everything except meat.
She wants everything with the exception of happiness for other people.

INFORMATION(S) IS/ARE

There’s nothing wrong with saying *Informationen* in German or *informations* in French, both being the plural forms of “information”. In English, however, the word is uncountable, i.e. there is **no plural form of it**. The singular form already expresses the same idea as “informations” in other languages:

I don’t have enough information. (correct)
I don’t have enough informations. (wrong)

Uncountability of the word “information” also implies that you can’t say “an information”. If you want to express that you are speaking about “one information”, you can use the expression “a piece of information”.

That’s an interesting piece of information. (correct)
That’s interesting information. (correct; notice no “an”)
That’s an interesting information. (wrong)

NAMES OF NUMBERS ABOVE 1000

First, we should note that there is a certain oddity in modern English in the nomenclature for numbers like “one thousand million”, “one million million”, etc. The modern English pattern differs from most of Europe (as well as from its earlier usage in English):

Number	Continental Europe	Modern English
10^6	<i>Million</i>	<i>Million</i>
10^9	<i>Milliard</i>	Billion
10^{12}	<i>Billion</i>	Trillion
10^{15}	<i>Billiard</i>	Quadrillion

As you can see, the Continental European convention is to alternate between -ion and -iary, whereas the modern English convention uses just the -ion suffix.

Another important difference in comparison to other European languages is that the words “hundred”, “thousand”, “million”, etc., *are never used in the plural* when pronouncing the name of a number (in the same vein as there are no plurals when speaking about the number of some objects, as we saw earlier), for example:

seven thousand three hundred (and) fifty two (7,352) (correct)

seven thousands three hundreds (and) fifty two (7,352) (wrong)

two million one hundred thousand (2,100,000) (correct)

two millions one hundred thousands (2,100,000) (wrong)

We only use the plural (“hundreds, thousands, millions”) when referring to an unspecified number of objects of the given order of magnitude. Compare:

Millions of locusts swarmed over the city.

Thirty million locusts swarmed over the city.

As to whether to use “and” between “hundred” and the rest of the number, both “two hundred and fifty” and “two hundred fifty” are correct. The variant with “and” is more common in British English whereas the variant without “and” is more common in American English.

Also note that, in the written form, orders can be separated using a comma, not a dot or a space, e.g. “2,100,000”, not “2.100.000” or “2 100 000”.

COLLECTIVE NOUNS

The word “majority” is one of a few nouns in English that can be used either with a singular or a plural verb form (i.e. both “majority is” and “majority are” are grammatically correct but carry a different meaning). These nouns are called *collective nouns* because they describe a *collective* (i.e. a *group*) of people or things. Their usage in English differs from most other languages; we use a singular verb if we mean the whole group as a single entity, and a plural verb if we mean all of the individuals who belong to the group. For example:

A majority of people don't want a war. (correct)

A majority of people doesn't want a war. (wrong)

Here we are obliged to use “don't” because we mean the people, not the “majority” itself. On the other hand, we would say

A majority of people is, by definition, a part of the population containing at least 50% of it. (correct)

A majority of people are, by definition, a part of the population containing at least 50% of it. (wrong)

because here we are referring to the “majority” itself, not to the individuals. The list of collective nouns includes, but is not limited to:

*Audience, cabinet, committee, company, corporation, council,
department, family, firm, group, jury, minority, navy, public, team.*

For example, you can say “his family are all tall”, when you mean “his family members are all tall”. Note, however, that the usage of a plural verb after a collective noun denoting an institution (such as department, parliament, etc.) is much more widespread in British English than in American English; a Brit would likely say “the parliament *are* voting today” whereas an American would probably say “the congress *is* voting today”.

A COUPLE OF ... ARE/IS

When learners see “a couple”, which is in the singular, they assume the verb must be in the singular too. However, the same we’ve said about collective nouns applies to expressions like “a couple” and “a few” as well.

Although the noun itself is in the singular, what it really describes is more than just one thing or person. It doesn’t matter whether you mean literally *a couple*, i.e. just two people or things, or you use “a couple of” synonymously to “a few”; it represents a plural idea, so the correct form is:

There were just a couple of people at the party. (correct)
There was just a couple of people at the party. (wrong)

Only when “a couple” is not followed by “of” and is used to mean “a pair of people”, *and* you refer to the couple as a whole, not just to individual persons who constitute it, you should treat it as singular:

A couple in love is always a nice thing to see. (correct)
A couple in love are always a nice thing to see. (wrong)

PEOPLE ARE/IS

If you say “people is”, you can be almost sure it is mistake. The word “people” is an irregular plural form of “person” (although the word “persons” also exists in English, it sounds very formal and is used primarily in legal contexts), and unlike some other languages (such as *la gente* in Spanish), it is a plural noun:

There are a lot of people at the party. (correct)
There is a lot of people at the party. (wrong)
There are a lot of persons at the party. (too formal)

(Note that “a lot”, just like “a couple”, is treated as a collective noun and doesn’t change the grammatical number in any way; we will explain that in more detail in the next section.) The same is true for any other verb, not just “to be”:

People generally don’t know much about mathematics. (correct)
People generally doesn’t know much about mathematics. (wrong)
Persons generally don’t know much about mathematics. (wrong)

However, the word “people” has also another meaning, namely “the set of individuals who belong to the same ethnic group”, i.e. something similar to “folk” or “nation”. In this sense, it is usually used in the plural:

Ancient peoples of Central America often saw each other as an enemy. (correct)
Ancient people of Central America often saw each other as an enemy. (probably wrong)

The second example is not grammatically wrong; it would imply that the individual people (persons) saw each other as an enemy. If we mean that different tribes saw each other as an enemy, we must use “peoples”.

In the very same sense, people could be used as a singular noun (but such usage is quite rare):

The Maya people was composed of distinct ethnic groups. (correct)

The Maya people were composed of distinct ethnic groups. (wrong)

Again, since we mean the whole Maya civilization, not just individuals, we have to use “people was”. If you want to be on the safe side, you can use another word like “civilization”, “tribe”, or “population”; these are always used with a singular verb.

A LOT OF ... ARE/IS

When something has an indefinite article, i.e. “a” or “an”, it is usually followed by a singular verb, for example “a tree is”. However, “a lot of” is used in a way similar to collective nouns (like “a couple of”):

A lot of new trees have been planted in our town. (correct)

A lot of new trees has been planted in our town. (wrong)

There are a lot of students in the lecture hall. (correct)

There is a lot of students in the lecture hall. (see below)

Another way to look at this is that in English, unlike many other languages, the subject doesn’t have to be in the nominative (grammatically, “of trees” is in the genitive). In the first sentence above, you should ask yourself, “What has been planted?” Since the answer is “new trees” and you would say “new trees have”, that’s the verb form you should use, regardless of what precedes the noun.

Note to the usage of “there is/are”: “There is + plural noun” is considered wrong by most speakers, but using “there’s + plural” is quite common in spoken language. This tendency seems to be quite natural, considering there is usually only one version of the corresponding expression in other languages, e.g. *il y a* in French and *es gibt* in German.

“A lot of” can be used also for uncountable nouns, i.e. nouns describing a substance or a material, such as “water”, “sand”, “iron”, etc. In this case, since the noun is in the singular, so is the verb:

A lot of water is being wasted every day. (correct)

A lot of water are being wasted every day. (wrong)

MANY, MUCH, A LOT OF, AND LOTS OF

These four phrases, “many”, “much”, “a lot of”, and “lots of”, all express a similar idea of a large amount of something, but they are not completely interchangeable. The first important difference is that “many” can be used only with countable nouns in the plural (e.g. “many trees”, “many houses”, “many people”), and “much” can only be used with uncountable (mass) nouns in the singular (e.g. “much water”, “much wood”, “much happiness”), for example:

There’s not much water in the swimming pool. (correct)

There’s not many water in the swimming pool. (wrong)

There are many people in the crowd. (correct)

There are much people in the crowd. (wrong)

There is no such distinction for “a lot of” and “lots of”, which can be used with both, i.e. both “a lot of/lots of people” and “a lot of/lots of water” are correct. Don’t forget what you learned in the last section, i.e. that when “a lot of” is used with a plural noun, the verb is in the plural too, even though “a lot” itself is in the singular:

A lot of people don't know the word "onychophagia". (correct)

A lot of people doesn't know the word "onychophagia". (wrong)

In a similar fashion, "lots of" with a singular noun is used with a singular verb:

Lots of water is being wasted every day. (correct)

Lots of water are being wasted every day. (wrong)

Again, the right way to think about the expression is to ask "what is being wasted?" Since the answer is "water" (a singular noun), the verb is in the singular as well.

Difference in register

The most important difference between "many"/"much" and "a lot of"/"lots of" is that the latter can't be used when asking about an amount ("how much", "how many") and, usually, when used in connection with another word ("too many", "as much as", "so many"):

How many people were there? (correct)

How a lot of people were there? (wrong)

We have as much money as they have. (correct)

We have as lots of money as they have. (wrong)

Nevertheless, note that "a lot more/fewer/less" is completely acceptable in informal communication.

In virtually all other situations, "many"/"much", "a lot of" and "lots of" mean essentially the same, but there is an important difference in register. "Many" and "much" sound quite formal, "a lot of" is informal, and "lots of" is even less formal:

There are many people at the party. (very formal)

There are a lot of people at the party. (informal)

There are lots of people at the party. (even more informal)

“Many” and “much” in affirmative (positive) sentences (like the one above) sound so formal you will almost never hear these in a normal conversation; you should mostly use them in writing.

In negative sentences, however, “many” and “much” sound quite natural even in normal speech; there is nothing wrong with saying, for example:

- I don't have much money. (fine in formal and informal contexts)*
- I don't have a lot of money. (fine in an informal context)*
- I don't have lots of money. (even more informal)*

IS A DOCTOR HE OR SHE?

Traditionally, in English, when you had to use a pronoun for a person whose sex was unknown because it had been previously referred to using a term like “child”, “doctor”, “researcher”, etc., you would say “he”, “him”, “his”, or “himself” (depending on the context). For example:

- Take care of your child. His life depends on you.*
- You should see a doctor. He will know what to do.*
- Every researcher has asked himself at some point of his career whether his contribution to science was good enough.*

Although the pronouns were masculine, the child in the first example could be a girl, and the doctor and the researcher could be women. However, this usage is now becoming outdated, as it is seen as stimulating gender inequality. There are several options to mitigate the issue. You can use “he or she” instead of “he”:

- Take care of your child. His or her life depends on you.*

You should see a doctor. He or she will know what to do.

Every researcher has asked himself or herself at some point of his or her career whether his or her contribution to science was good enough.

As you can see especially in the third example, this grammatical tool soon becomes clumsy if you use it too often. Another possibility is to reword the whole sentence using the corresponding plural nouns, but this doesn't always work:

Take care of your children. Their lives depend on you.

~~*You should see doctors. They will know what to do.*~~

All researchers have asked themselves at some point of their career whether their contribution to science was good enough.

Finally, it is becoming increasingly widespread and regarded as completely grammatically correct to use a plural pronoun for a singular noun to refer to it in a gender-neutral way:

Take care of your child. Their life depends on you.

You should see a doctor. They will know what to do.

Every researcher has asked themselves at some point of their career whether their contribution to science was good enough.

Such sentences may sound odd at first because they seemingly break the most elementary grammatical rules. However, there seems to be an inevitable trend for this usage to completely replace the gender-neutral “he, his, him” in English.

Note that some authors went as far as to always use a *feminine* pronoun, for example:

Every researcher has asked herself at some point of her career whether her contribution to science was good enough.

even though they refer to male researchers as well. Please, don't do that. It is unnecessary and confusing, unless you do indeed mean only female researchers.

EACH OTHER'S OR EACH OTHERS'

You've certainly heard phrases like "to hold each other's hand", but where to put the apostrophe in these in their written form? Long story short, the correct spelling is the one used in the previous sentence, i.e. *each other's*. Another example:

- ||||| *We didn't see each other's face. (correct)*
- ||||| *We didn't see each others' face. (wrong)*

This is quite logical. The possessive form in English is formed by adding 's at the end of a noun, unless it is a plural noun, in which case we write just an apostrophe, e.g.

- ||||| *This boy's girlfriend ... (correct, singular)*
- ||||| *These boys' girlfriends ... (correct, plural)*

This rules out *each others*, as the possessive apostrophe must be there. In the case of "each other", "other" is in the singular, because it's after "each"—you wouldn't say "each boys" instead of "each boy", would you. By adding the possessive 's, we get the correct form *each other's*.

MATTER/QUESTION OF TIME

The equivalent to the phrase "a matter/question of time" in most European languages is literally "a question of time", e.g. *una cuestión*

de tiempo in Spanish or *eine Frage der Zeit* in German. In English, both “a matter of time” and “a question of time” are acceptable, but the phrase “a question of time” is slowly falling out of fashion.

The difference is even more pronounced in connection with “just” which is nowadays only rarely used with “a question of time”:

- It’s just a matter of time. (correct)
- It’s just a question of time. (dated)

IN (THE) CASE OF

Whether to use “the” in “in (the) case” depends on the intended meaning. “In case of” is synonymous with “in the event of”, for example:

- In case of fire, please call the fire department. (correct)
- In the case of fire, please call the fire department. (wrong)
- In case of earthquake, leave the building. (correct)
- In the case of earthquake, leave the building. (wrong)

“In case” can be used also without “of” in the phrase “just in case”, which means “just to be safe if something bad happened”:

- It’s dangerous outside. I’ll take my gun with me, just in case.

The phrase “in the case of” (with the definite article) is usually used in the meaning “regarding”, “in the matter of”, “in relation to”:

- I know that you have always been faithful, but in the case of your husband, I wouldn’t be so sure. (correct)
- I know that you have always been faithful, but in case of your husband, I wouldn’t be so sure. (wrong)

TON OR TONNE

In English, “ton” refers to the unit used in the US defined as 1 ton = 2,000 pounds = 907 kg. It can also refer to the ton used in the UK where 1 ton = 2,240 pounds = 1,016 kg, but which is no longer officially used (since 1985). If you want to refer to the so called “metric ton”, the word you are looking for is pronounced the same but is spelled “tonne”, i.e. 1 tonne = 1000 kg.

ON (THE) ONE HAND

Both “on the one hand” and “on one hand” are considered correct by most dictionaries, but “on the one hand” is much more common:

On the one hand, I really wanted to come. On the other hand, I hated all the people who would be coming with me. (correct)

On one hand, I really wanted to come. On the other hand, I hated all the people who would be coming with me. (considered unnatural by some)

Intuitively, the first “the” seems illogical because you are referring to one of your hands without specifying which one. You wouldn't say, for example, “I wore a glove on the one hand and nothing on the other one”, unless you were waving one of your hands in front of you while saying that.

I’ve read an explanation that the first “the” indeed does originate in gesticulating with one of your hands while saying the phrase—that is, you would look at your hand and say “on the *one* hand ...”. Whether this is the real etymology, we may never know.

ADVICE(S) IS/ARE

Slightly surprisingly, “advice” is uncountable in English, and as such there is no plural form of it:

His advice was very helpful. (correct)

His advices were very helpful. (wrong)

Since it is uncountable, we cannot say “an advice”. We would usually say simply “advice” (without an article), or “piece of advice”:

This was good advice. (correct)

This was a good piece of advice. (correct)

This was a good advice. (wrong)

MONEY IS/ARE

Just like water, sugar, or love, *money* (in its most common sense) is an uncountable noun. This means, in particular, that we can’t have “a money”, which would be the same as saying that we have “one money”; you can have “one dollar”, for example, but “one money” doesn’t really make sense.

However, just like other mass nouns, “money” is always used with a singular verb. Just like we would say “the sugar is on the table” (not “the sugar *are*”), we would use “is” with money too:

The money is on the table. (correct)

The money are on the table. (wrong)

Also, “many money” is incorrect, since “many” means “a large number of”, so we have to use “much” (or “a lot of” or another expression

which can be used both with countable and uncountable nouns). For example:

- My parents don't have much money. (correct)*
- My parents don't have a lot of money. (correct)*
- My parents don't have many money. (wrong)*

However, just like water, sugar, and love, money can be used as a countable noun to express a slightly different idea. Just like the British *waters* may be dangerous, you can put three *sugars* in your coffee, and many people have several great *loves* in their lives, “moneys” or “monies” (the possible plural forms of money) may be used to talk about several sources of money. Nevertheless, such usage is mostly limited to legal contexts, and using the word “moneys” in an everyday conversation would make you sound unnatural.

THE PERSON WHO/THAT ...

Many English speakers believe there's a rule in English that you can't use “that” when speaking about a person, as in “the waiter that served me was really friendly”. Even though examples of breaking the rule can be found as early as in the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare, it is advisable for a learner to follow it; if all English speakers consider using “who” for a person acceptable, but many consider using “that” to be a mistake, it is better to use the variant acceptable by all, isn't it? For example:

- The waiter who served me was really friendly. (correct)*
- The waiter that served me was really friendly. (discouraged)*
- The man who stole the car was arrested. (correct)*
- The man that stole the car was arrested. (discouraged)*

ECONOMICS OR ECONOMY

The **economy** is, according to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, “the relationship between production, trade and the supply of money in a particular country or region”, so we can say, for example:

||| *The economy is in recession.*

Economics is a science that studies economies and develops possible models for their functioning, e.g.

||| *He studied economics at the LSE (London School of Economics).*

Economic, without an “s”, is an adjective meaning “connected with economy”, e.g.

||| *The economic growth is very slow.*

Economical, on the other hand, carries a somewhat figurative meaning of “not requiring too much of something” (such as money, space, time, etc.), e.g.

||| *That placement of furniture exhibits a very economical use of space.*

10 DOLLARS IS/ARE

When we speak about a specific sum of money or about a price, we usually treat it as singular:

||||| *10 dollars is too much for that. (correct)*

||||| *10 dollars are too much for that. (unnatural)*

You can think about “10 dollars” as being short for “the amount of 10 dollars” or “the price of 10 dollars”. Since we would say “the amount is” and “the price is”, “[the amount/price of] 10 dollars is” is also correct.

However, whether to treat it as being singular or plural depends on whether you think about the money as about the sum or as about the individual coins or banknotes:

I just got 5 euros. I gave it [the amount] to my mum. (correct)
I just got 5 euros. I gave them [the individual euros] to my mum. (possible)

Nevertheless, this only makes sense when speaking about physical money and not something abstract like a price. When you talk about electronic money, using “it” is the only natural choice:

He transferred £44.95 to my account, but it hasn't arrived yet. (cor.)
He transferred £44.95 to my account, but they haven't arrived yet. (wrong)