Nouns – singular & plural

(including the agreement of nouns & verbs in grammatical number)
As we’ve seen, nouns are words that represent things.

Sometimes, we want to refer to more than one thing – a group of things, in fact.

Usually, we make a noun plural (capable of referring to many things) by simply adding an *s* to the end – for example: walls, books, dogs, streets, cars, planks, lights, windows, trees.
Pluralisation of nouns – exceptions

- Although most nouns are pluralised by just adding *s*, there is another, quite large group that requires the addition of *es* to become plural.

- For example: circus, circuses
  - bush, bushes
  - tomato, tomatoes,
  - potato, potatoes
  - bus, buses
Some **rare kinds of noun** require plural endings different from any of those already cited – for instance:
- tooth, teeth
- wife, wives
- index, indices
- mouse, mice
- foot, feet
- man, men,
- child, children

**Foreign-derived words** may have their own kinds of plural ending:
- datum, data
- graffito, graffiti,
- criterion, criteria
- phenomenon, phenomena
- alumnus/alumna, alumni
Some plural words have no singular form: scissors, trousers, binoculars, jeans, spectacles. After all, we don’t ever say ‘a trouser’. However, we can make these nouns look more reassuringly singular if we really want to, as in ‘a pair of jeans’.

Uncountable nouns such as music, poetry, cement, sunlight, luck, greed and geography have no plural forms.

Some words that are plural in form but singular in meaning – e.g. news – take a singular verb. (‘The news about his father’s health was bad.’)

However, other such words (ending in s but with a singular meaning) require a plural verb – e.g. ‘The police found that the premises were empty except for a dead body’; ‘The victim’s savings have been stolen.’

It is only your growing familiarity with the English language and its conventions that will help you to know whether to use a singular or plural verb with some of these trickier words. Read widely!

Devised by Jo Killmister, Skills Enhancement Program, Newcastle Business School
The trickiest case of all: compound nouns

Pluralisation is made trickier still by the fact that some compound nouns are hyphenated while others are not. The problem of what to do with compounds has been resolved in the following way:

- **Hyphenated compound nouns** take an *s* at the end – 16–year–olds, stick–in–the–muds, with the exception of mother–in–law, father–in–law etc. (There are always exceptions in English!)

- **Unhyphenated compound nouns** should have the *s* added to the most important noun.
  
  - gins and tonic
  - poets laureate
  - Egg McMuffins
  - secretaries of state
  - rules of thumb

  (Note – Some compound constructions such as ‘give and take’ in a sentence like ‘Give and take is essential to good management policy’ have no plural form and take a singular verb.)

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Collective Nouns

- Collective nouns are not as tricky as they look. Even though words such as crowd, herd, jury, team, swarm, audience and staff refer to collections or groups of many things, they are treated as singular. That is, collective nouns take a singular verb.

- Examples:
  The army is currently based near Kabul.
  The entire class is doing well at Economics.

However, context can make a difference. For instance, when we are conscious that a collective noun refers to a group of individuals we tend to use a plural verb with it rather than treating it like a single entity. In this sort of case, we may choose to say, “The majority are in favour of the merger,” rather than, “The majority is in favour of the merger.”

Here is another example of the importance of context. While, we would usually treat a family as a single entity, there are occasions when we may choose to see it as a group of individuals – e.g. “The family were informed that if their various forms of aggressive behaviour continued they would be evicted.”
Indefinite pronouns: each, every, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, someone etc.

- These take a **singular verb**.

- Examples:
  i) **Each** of the managers **was** questioned about the discrepancies in the accounts.

  ii) **Every** one of those columns of figures **contains** an error.

  iii) **No one expects** a drop in profits in the new financial year.
References & acknowledgements:

- King, G. (2000). *Good Grammar*. Glasgow, UK: HarperCollins. (Some examples were drawn from this text.)

- Dr Jim Jose, Associate Professor, School of Economics, Politics & Tourism, for his guidance through my reference to his *Study Skills Online* (2000).


Recommended source of practice: