

Q. I have recently heard two radio ads. In one, an ad of a medical facility states that it accepts “most insurances.” I would have written “most insurance,” even though the plural of “insurance” is meant. In the other ad a customer providing a testimonial for an automobile dealership says, “Everyone deserves an applaud.” I would have said “Everyone deserves applause.” Am I correct?

A. Attorney John Fanta, who sent in these questions, is correct in both of his preferences. In addition, he has unintentionally pointed out two strong forces: the tendency of English speakers to move words from the noncount category to the count category and to move the parts of speech from one category to another by changing verbs to nouns, nouns to verbs, adjectives to nouns, and so forth. Both tendencies have been accelerated by the domination of the oral over the written media: television and radio superseding newspapers and books.

The term “most insurances” demonstrates the movement of a noncount noun (*insurance*) to a count noun. Traditionally, *insurance* has been a noncount noun. Noncount nouns are recognizable by the fact that they do not have a plural form and they are not countable. You would say, “Everyone should have insurance,” or “All people should have insurance.” Not “All people should have insurances.”

In addition, the noncount nouns are not countable. You would not say, “One insurance, two insurances.” Noncount nouns do not require the definite article *the* or the indefinite articles *a/an* to precede them. You would say “Insurance is important,” omitting the definite article *the*. You would not say, “The insurance is important.” And when you are discussing noncount nouns, you would use the modifiers *much* and *little* or *less* instead of *many* and *few*.

Old English (before A.D. 1066) had many more noncount nouns than Modern English has, and the number of noncount nouns continues to decrease rapidly. The noncount nouns that survive are mainly nouns that name foods, like *flour*, *squash*, and *rice*, and abstract

nouns, like *happiness*, *contentment*, *independence*, and *comprehension*.

Count nouns do require either a definite article or an indefinite article preceding them in their singular form. We must say “*The* book is on the table” or “*A* book is on the table,” although no article is needed when the noun is plural: “Books are on the table.” Count nouns are countable: “One book, two books.” Modifiers are different for count nouns and for noncount nouns; you would say “many joys, much pleasure,” “few coins, little change.”

To make things even more confusing, some nouns are noncount in one context and count nouns in others. We can say, for example, “Freedom is essential” (noncount) or “The various freedoms we enjoy are essential” (count). We can say, “Sugar is a sweetener” (noncount) or “Pass me a sugar” (count) when you mean “a packet.” Nouns like *interest* and *consideration* are count nouns sometimes and noncount nouns at other times. Readers have asked whether “interest” or “interests” was proper in the phrase, “conflict of interest.” (Traditionally, the noncount form has been proper.) “You should have consideration for others,” but “other considerations may be important.”

Nouns continue to slide out of the noncount category. For example, traditionally, *behavior* was a noncount noun. But when professional or business groups constantly use certain noncount nouns, they tend to shift them into the count category because of the principle of analogy (most nouns are count nouns). So psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and educators began to talk about *behaviors*. And the general public followed suit (we all

want to sound knowledgeable in those areas), and, thus, *behavior* has become a count noun.

That’s also true of that ubiquitous noun *depression*. We used to say, “Some persons suffer from depression” (noncount); now almost everyone would say, “Some persons suffer from depressions” (count). And *humidity*, formerly always a noncount noun is joining the ranks of the count nouns, with those weather gurus on television and radio leading the way.

However, to answer Attorney Fanta’s question, I tend to be conservative about usage, following poet Alexander Pope’s advice:

Be not the first by whom the new
are tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old
aside.

With regard to Attorney Fanta’s second question about the propriety of the phrase “an applaud,” which changes the verb *applaud* to a noun, we English speakers like to play with words by changing them from one category to another. Thus, long ago the verbs *walk*, *run*, *drive*, *break*, and *spin* were made nouns as well as verbs. More recently, the verb *cut* also became a noun; the verb *embed* is now a noun; and *to admit* has become *an admit*. So it is not surprising that some enterprising copywriter decided to use the verb *applaud* as a noun, but it seems a waste of his time because we already have a perfectly good noun that means the same thing—applause. **TFL**

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