

plurals

In the English language, most nouns are made plural by simply adding an “s” to the end of the word. However, there are many exceptions to this rule. This handout will help you identify when to use these irregular plural nouns.

Best Practice

There are many rules and exceptions for plurals. If you are ever unsure of the correct plural form for a specific word, consult a dictionary.

Regular Plural Nouns

Most nouns are made plural by adding an “s” to the end of the word.

Examples: cat → cats book → books pencil → pencils

Irregular Plural Nouns

For most irregular plural nouns, the plural form depends on the final letters and final sound of the singular.

“ch,” “sh,” “s,” and “x”

Add “es” to nouns ending in “ch,” “sh,” “s,” or “x.”

Examples: bunch → bunches dish → dishes mess → messes box → boxes

However, if a “-ch” word ends with a “k” sound, use an “s” instead.

Examples: stomach → stomachs epoch → epochs

“y”

For nouns ending in a consonant and “y,” replace the “y” with “ies.”

Examples: baby → babies butterfly → butterflies

However, only add an “s” for nouns ending in a vowel and “y.”

Examples: day → days boy → boys

“o”

Nouns ending with a vowel and “o” take an “s.”

Examples: radio → radios zoo → zoos video → videos

Words imported into English from Italian and Spanish take an “s.”

Examples: canto → cantos solo → solos taco → tacos

Shortened versions of nouns also take an “s.”

Examples: photo → photos memo → memos kilo → kilos

Other nouns ending with a consonant and a vowel can take either “s” or “es.” Check a dictionary for the preferred term.

Examples: volcano → volcanos, volcanoes halo → halos, haloes buffalo → buffalos, buffaloes

However, seven words must end in “es” in their plural form: “echo,” “embargo,” “hero,” “potato,” “tomato,” “torpedo,” and “veto.”

Examples: potato → potatoes veto → vetoes hero → heroes

“f”

Nouns ending in “lf” will change their endings to “lves.”

Examples: self → selves half → halves wolf → wolves

Exception: gulf → gulfs

Nouns ending in “ife” will change to “ives.”

Examples: life → lives knife → knives wife → wives

Exceptions: strife → strifes fife → fifes

Nouns ending in “eaf” will change to “eaves.”

Examples: leaf → leaves sheaf → sheaves

Other nouns ending in “f,” “ff,” or “fe” will take an “s.”

Examples: roof → roofs cuff → cuffs giraffe → giraffes

However, some nouns ending in “f” have two plural forms. (The underlined plural is the preferred one.)

Examples: hoof → hooves, hoofs wharf → wharves, wharfs

Plurals from Old English

Some nouns in Modern English still retain their Old English plural forms. Many of these words become plural by changing their vowels instead of by adding an ending.

For nouns with “oo” in the middle, the vowel changes from “oo” to “ee.”

Examples: tooth → teeth foot → feet goose → geese

For some nouns, change the vowel sound “ouse” to “ice.”

Examples: mouse → mice louse → lice



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Exception: house → houses

The “a” in “man” changes to “e.” This is also true for compound words that contain “man.”

Examples: man → men woman → women fireman → firemen hitman → hitmen

Other Old English nouns are made plural by adding “en.”

Examples: child → children ox → oxen

Plurals without Singular Forms

There are several nouns in English that do not exist in the singular form. Many of these terms are items of clothing or tools.

Examples: pants shorts tongs pliers scissors

These words are grammatically plural.

Example: My pants are dirty.

Singulars without Plural Forms

Non-count nouns, also known as mass nouns, cannot be quantified and lack a plural form. They usually fall into one of the following categories: gases, liquids, metals, abstractions, languages, particles, foods, natural phenomena, and sets of items.

Examples: oxygen garbage furniture English

Singulars with Identical Plural Forms

For some nouns, the singular and plural forms are the same. Many of these words are animal-related.

Examples: fish → fish deer → deer sheep → sheep species → species

Special Plurals

Greek and Latin Nouns

Some English nouns are borrowed from Greek or Latin; therefore, they have Greek or Latin plural forms. Many of these words are used in scientific and technical contexts. Below are some of the most common classes of these words.

Greek-derived nouns ending in “on” are changed to “a.”

Examples: criterion → criteria phenomenon → phenomena

Greek-derived nouns ending in “ma” can be changed to “mata,” although “s” is also acceptable.

Examples: stoma → stomata or stomas stigma → stigmata or stigmias

Latin-derived nouns ending in “a” are changed to “ae.”

Examples: alga → algae alumna → alumnae vertebra → vertebrae larva → larvae

Latin-derived nouns ending in “us” are changed to “i.”



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Examples: fungus → fungi alumnus → alumni stimulus → stimuli syllabus → syllabi

Note: In some cases, English speakers do not use the Latin plural form, but instead add an “es.”

Examples: campus → campuses bonus → bonuses virus → viruses

Latin-derived nouns ending in “um” are changed to “a.”

Examples: datum → data medium → media memorandum → memoranda

Latin-derived nouns ending in “is” are changed to “es.”

Examples: thesis → theses hypothesis → hypotheses basis → bases

Latin-derived nouns ending in “ix” and “ex” are changed to “ices.”

Examples: matrix → matrices vertex → vertices appendix → appendices

Compound Plurals

Compound words usually contain one word which is more important than the other. This word is called the head, and it normally (but not always) appears at the end of the word. This is the part of the word that is pluralized. Most compound words place the plural on the final element of the word.

Examples: lifetime → lifetimes airplane → airplanes

A compound noun is one that is made up of a small collection of words. The head is usually the first word. In such cases, the first word should be pluralized.

Examples: brother-in-law → brothers-in-law

However, in some cases, the head may appear last. For these words, pluralize the last word.

Examples: merry-go-round → merry-go-rounds fact-finder → fact-finders

For compound words with no head, simply pluralize the final element.

Examples: fade-out → fade-outs know-it-all → know-it-alls

Acronyms

To pluralize acronyms and words with capital letters, add only an “s.”

Examples: ABCs HMOs YMCAs JPEGs

Abbreviations

To form the plural versions of most abbreviations, add only an “s.” If the abbreviation contains a period, place the period after the “s.”

Examples: Eds. (Editors) vols. (volumes) lbs. (pounds) Drs. (Doctors)

Academic Degrees

Plural abbreviations of academic degrees are among the few exceptions to the rule regarding apostrophes. To pluralize the abbreviation of an academic degree, use an apostrophe in order to prevent confusion.

Examples: Ph.D.'s B.A.'s M.A.'s



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Decades

When pluralizing the names of decades, add an “s” with no apostrophe.

Examples: the 1960s the ‘90s

Letters of the Alphabet

Use an apostrophe when pluralizing lowercase letters. However, do not use an apostrophe with capital letters unless doing so is necessary to prevent confusion. For example, use an apostrophe with the letter grade “A” in order to avoid confusing it with the word “As.”

Examples: mind your p’s and q’s three Cs straight A’s

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