4 txt msgs (text messages)

Text messages (sent for example by mobile phone) use a large number of abbreviations to save time and space. Words are shortened, often by leaving out vowels. Letters and numbers are used instead of words (or parts of words) that sound the same. Initial letters only are used for some common expressions. Some typical examples:

- c u l8r  
  See you later.
- r u cumin 2day?  
  Are you coming today?
- tx 4 a gr8 party  
  Thanks for a great party.
- just 2 let u no  
  Just to let you know.
- wil u b hr Thu eve?  
  Will you be here Thursday evening?
- RUOK?  
  Are you OK?
- got ur msg  
  Got your message.
- wil b @ bbq @ 9  
  Will be at barbecue at 9.
- 2 bsy atm, tlk l8r  
  Too busy at the moment, talk later.
- if Uv tym, send pix o kids  
  If you have time, send pictures of kids.
- need mo infmtn  
  Need more information.

148 countable and uncountable nouns (1): basic information

1 the difference between countable and uncountable nouns

Countable nouns are the names of separate objects, people, ideas etc which can be counted. We can use numbers and the article *a/an* with countable nouns; they have plurals.

- a cat  
- a newspaper  
- three cats  
- two newspapers

Uncountable (or ‘mass’) nouns are the names of materials, liquids, abstract qualities, collections and other things which we see as masses without clear boundaries, and not as separate objects. We cannot use numbers with uncountable nouns, and most are singular with no plurals. We do not normally use *a/an* with uncountable nouns, though there are some exceptions (see 149.4).

- water (NOT a water, two waters)  
- wool (NOT a wool, two wools)  
- weather (NOT a weather, two weathers)

Some determiners (see 154) can only be used with countable nouns (e.g. *many, few*); others can only be used with uncountables (e.g. *much, little*).

Compare:

- How many hours do you work?  
  How much money do you earn?

2 problems

Usually it is easy to see whether a noun is countable or uncountable. Obviously *house* is normally a countable noun, and *sand* is not. But it is not always so clear: compare *a journey* (countable) and *travel* (uncountable); *a glass* (countable) and *glass* (uncountable); *vegetables* (countable) and *fruit* (uncountable). The following rules will help, but to know exactly how a particular noun can be used, it is necessary to check in a good dictionary.
3 travel and a journey; a piece of advice

Travel and journey have very similar meanings, but travel is normally uncountable (it means 'travelling in general', and we do not talk about 'a travel'), while journey is countable (a journey is one particular movement from one place to another) and can have a plural: journeys.

I like travel, but it's often tiring. Did you have a good journey?

Often we can make an uncountable word countable by putting 'a piece of' or a similar expression in front of it.

He never listens to advice. Can I give you a piece of advice?

Here are some other examples of general/particular pairs. (Note that some words that are uncountable in English have countable equivalents in other languages.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uncountable</th>
<th>Countable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accommodation</td>
<td>a place to live (not an accommodation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baggage</td>
<td>a piece/item of baggage; a case/trunk/bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bread</td>
<td>a piece/loaf of bread; a loaf; a roll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chess</td>
<td>a game of chess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chewing gum</td>
<td>a piece of chewing gum (not a chewing gum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equipment</td>
<td>a piece of equipment; a tool etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furniture</td>
<td>a piece/article of furniture; a table, chair etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td>a piece of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>a fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lightning</td>
<td>a flash of lightning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luck</td>
<td>a piece/bit/stroke of luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luggage</td>
<td>a piece/item of luggage; a case/trunk/bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>money</td>
<td>a note; a coin; a sum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news</td>
<td>a piece of news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permission</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>a poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>progress</td>
<td>a step forward; an advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>publicity</td>
<td>an advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
<td>a piece of research; an experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rubbish</td>
<td>a piece of rubbish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slang</td>
<td>a slang word/expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thunder</td>
<td>a clap of thunder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traffic</td>
<td>cars etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>a word/expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work</td>
<td>a job; a piece of work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that when uncountable English words are borrowed by other languages, they may change into countable words with different meanings (for example parking means the activity of parking in general, but French un parking means 'a car park').

4 materials: glass, paper etc

Words for materials are uncountable, but we can often use the same word as a countable noun to refer to something made of the material. Compare:
countable and uncountable nouns (1): basic information

- I'd like some typing paper.
  I'm going out to buy a paper (= a newspaper)
- The window's made of unbreakable glass.
  Would you like a glass of water?

Nouns for materials, liquids etc can be countable when they are used to talk about different types.

Not all washing powders are kind to your hands.
We have a selection of fine wines at very good prices.
The same thing happens when we talk about ordering drinks. Compare:
Have you got any coffee?
Could I have two coffees? (= cups of coffee)

5 fruit, rice, wheat, spaghetti, hair; vegetables, peas, grapes, oats

Many things (e.g. rice, grapes) can be seen either as a collection of separate elements or as a mass. Some names for things of this kind are uncountable, while others are countable (usually plural).

Uncountable: fruit, rice, spaghetti, macaroni (and other pasta foods), sugar, salt, corn, wheat, barley, rye, maize.

Countable: vegetable(s), bean(s), pea(s), grape(s), oats, lentil(s).

Fruit is very expensive, but vegetables are cheap.
Wheat is used to make bread; oats are used to make porridge.
Is the spaghetti ready? These grapes are sour.

Hair is normally uncountable in English.

His hair is black.

But one strand of hair is a hair (countable).

So why has he got two blonde hairs on his jacket?

For words that are used to talk about one 'piece' of uncountable collections (e.g. a grain of corn, a blade of grass), see 430.

6 abstract nouns: time, life, experience etc

Many abstract nouns can have both uncountable and countable uses, often corresponding to more 'general' and more 'particular' meanings. Compare:

- Don't hurry – there's plenty of time.
  Have a good time.
  There are times when I just want to stop work.
- Life is complicated.
  He's had a really difficult life.
- She hasn't got enough experience for the job.
  I had some strange experiences last week.
- It's hard to feel pity for people like that.
  It's a pity it's raining.
- Your plan needs more thought.
  I had some frightening thoughts in the night.
- I need to practise conversation.
  Jane and I had a very interesting conversation.

See 149.2 for more details.
For more about time, see 593; for life, see 324.
7 illnesses
The names of illnesses are usually singular uncountable in English, including those ending in -s.

If you've already had measles, you can't get it again.
There's a lot of flu around at the moment.
The words for some minor ailments are countable: e.g. a cold, a sore throat, a headache. However, toothache, earache, stomach-ache and backache are usually uncountable in British English. In American English, these words are generally countable if they refer to particular attacks of pain. Compare:

I've got toothache. (BrE) I have a toothache. (AmE)

For the with measles, flu etc, see 70.14.
For more information on the use of articles with countable and uncountable nouns, see 65.

149 countable and uncountable nouns (2): advanced points

1 20 square metres of wall
Singular countable nouns are sometimes used as uncountables (e.g. with much, enough, plenty of or a lot of) in order to express the idea of amount.

There's enough paint for 20 square metres of wall.
I've got too much nose and not enough chin.
If you buy one of these you get plenty of car for your money.

2 not much difference
Some countable abstract nouns can be used uncountably after little, much and other determiners. Common examples are difference, point, reason, idea, change, difficulty, chance and question.

There's not much difference between 'begin' and 'start'.
I don't see much point in arguing about it.
We have little reason to expect prices to fall.
I haven't got much idea of her plans.
There isn't any change in his condition.
They experienced little difficulty in stealing the painting.
Do you think we have much chance of catching the train?
There's some question of our getting a new Managing Director.
Note the expression have difficulty (in) ... ing.
I have difficulty (in) remembering faces. (NOT I have difficulties ...)

3 in all weathers; on your travels
A few uncountable nouns have plural uses in fixed expressions.

He goes running in all weathers.
Did you meet anybody exciting on your travels?
Gulliver's Travels (novel by Jonathan Swift)
4 a/an with uncountable nouns

With certain uncountable nouns – especially nouns referring to human emotions and mental activity – we often use a/an when we are limiting their meaning in some way.

We need a secretary with a first-class knowledge of German. (not ... with first-class knowledge of German.)
She has always had a deep distrust of strangers.
That child shows a surprising understanding of adult behaviour.
My parents wanted me to have a good education. (not ... to have good education.)
You've been a great help.
I need a good sleep.

Note that these nouns cannot normally be used in the plural, and that most uncountable nouns cannot be used with a/an at all, even when they have an adjective.

My father enjoys very good health. (not ... a very good health.)
We're having terrible weather. (not ... a terrible weather.)
He speaks excellent English. (not ... an excellent English.)
It's interesting work. (not ... an interesting work.)

5 plural uncountables

Some uncountable nouns are plural. They have no singular forms with the same meaning, and cannot normally be used with numbers.

I've bought the groceries. (but not ... a grocery. or ... three groceries.)
The Dover customs have found a large shipment of cocaine. (but not The Dover customs has ...) Many thanks for your help. (but not Much thank ...)

For details, see 524.7.

150 country

1 countable use

Country (countable) = 'nation', 'land'.
Scotland is a cold country.
France is the country I know best.
How many countries are there in Europe?

2 uncountable use

Country (uncountable) = 'open land without many buildings'.
I like wild country best.

With this meaning, we cannot say a country or countries.

My parents live in nice country near Belfast. (not ... in a nice country ...) The expression the country (the opposite of the town) is very common.
We live in the country just outside Manchester.
Would you rather live in the town or the country?

For information about countable and uncountable nouns, see 148–149.