

Articles and Nouns



An **article** is a word that identifies (or modifies) a **noun**. A noun may be a person, place, thing, or idea. Each noun is also either a *count noun* (countable) or a *mass noun* (uncountable). There are two types of articles: *indefinite* and *definite*. The articles **a** and **an** are indefinite articles and the article **the** is a definite article. The noun and its use in a sentence is the determining factor when considering which article to use to modify the noun.

Indefinite Articles: A and An

Articles “**a**” and “**an**” are articles that are used when the noun is not specific and used in a general sense. Each indefinite article also has specific rules for its use in a sentence.

Indefinite Article: A



A is used when the noun is singular and begins with a consonant or with a vowel that *sounds* like a consonant.

Examples:

“Riding **a** bike is one way to exercise and have fun at the same time.”

“Bike” is the noun in this sentence and starts with a consonant sound.

“**A** ukulele looks like a small guitar.”

“Ukulele” is the noun in this sentence and starts with a consonant sound.

Note: The “you” sound in “ukulele” is considered as a consonant sound.



“According to folklore, gold is found at the end of **a** rainbow.”

“Rainbow” is the noun in this sentence and starts with a consonant sound.

Indefinite Article: An

An is used when the noun is singular and begins with a vowel *sound* or with a silent “h” (as in “hour”).

Examples:

“Dr. Thompson is **an** Oceanographer.”

“Oceanographer” is the noun in this sentence and starts with a vowel sound.

“Devin used **an** umbrella to stay dry.”

“Umbrella” is the noun in this sentence and starts with a vowel sound.

“It was **an** honor to receive the academic achievement award.”

“Honor” is the noun in this sentence and starts with a vowel sound.



Definite Article: *The*

The definite article ***the*** is used when the noun is either singular or plural, and has already been identified.

Ask yourself:

? “Is the noun I want to use referring to a noun specifically mentioned or described previously in my paper?”

If the answer is yes, then use ***the***.

OR

? “Am I using the noun in a general sense?”

If the answer is yes, then use ***a*** or ***an***.



Example:

“Will and Bradley went pumpkin picking in early October. Just before Halloween, they decided to make pumpkin pie out of ***the*** pumpkins.”



- In this sentence, the noun is “pumpkins.” The definite article ***the*** is used because the reader knows Will and Bradley are making pumpkin pie out of the pumpkins they picked when they went pumpkin picking. These are specific pumpkins, not just any pumpkins.

On the other hand, when using a more general use of the noun “pumpkin,” use the article ***a***:

Example:

“Everyone at the party made a dish to pass for either dinner or dessert. Tori made ***a*** pumpkin pie to share for dessert.”

- In this example, the noun “pumpkin” is used in a general sense. The indefinite article ***a*** is used because “pumpkin” is not a specific pumpkin and begins with a consonant sound, not a vowel sound.



When *not* to use articles

In some cases, articles are not necessary to use in a sentence. There are two specific instances in which articles are not required prior to the noun.

1) Articles are unnecessary before singular proper nouns that refer to a specific place.

Examples:

“I want to visit Paris, France.”

“Paris, France” is the singular proper noun that refers to a specific place.

“Samantha spent a semester abroad in Spain.”

“Spain” is the singular proper noun that refers to a specific place.



Exception to the rule: Use the definite article *the* when referring to geographical locations.

Examples:

“I spent my entire winter break in *the* Caribbean.”

“My favorite place to camp is in *the* Adirondacks.”



Example proving both the rule and the exception:

“Niagara Falls is a popular tourist spot located in *the* Northeast.”

“Niagara Falls” is a singular proper noun referring to a specific place and therefore does not need an article, but the definite article is needed in the sentence when referring to the geographical location of the tourist spot.

2) Articles are unnecessary when the noun, usually plural, is used to indicate a general category.

Examples:

“Cat scratches may lead to a skin infection or even Cat Scratch Fever.”

The phrase “cat scratches” is made up of two nouns that are used to refer to a general category and therefore does not need an article.

“We went to the mall to buy clothes.”

The noun “clothes” is used in the sentence as a general category and does not require an article before it. On the other hand, the noun “mall” is used to denote a specific place, and therefore *the* is required in the sentence.



Nouns: Count or Mass?

Generally, a noun may be a person, place, thing, or idea. Nouns are also classified as either *count nouns* or *mass nouns*. It is important to understand this classification in order to appropriately describe (or modify) nouns within sentences.

Count Nouns

A noun is considered to be countable, or a *count noun*, when it is possible to literally count how many of the *noun* exists and a quantifying number may be assigned to that noun.

Count nouns may be:



- Names of persons, animals, plants, insects, and their parts: a girl or 5 girls; a bird or 2 birds; a tree or 3 trees; a bug or 10 bugs; a leg or 4 legs.
- Objects with a definite shape: a computer or 2 computers; a ball or 6 balls; a car or 3 cars.
- Units of measurement: a pound or 2 pounds; an ounce or 5 ounces.
- Words of classification: a phrase or 3 phrases; a word or 6 words.
- Some abstract words: an idea or 2 ideas; a plan or 3 plans.



Examples:

“There are twenty chairs in the classroom.”

The noun “chair” is countable because you are able to count how many chairs are in a classroom.

“There are twenty-four hours in a day.”

The noun “hour” is countable because you are able to count how many hours are in a day.

To check if the noun is a Count Noun, ask yourself:

- Can the noun be counted or quantified by a number?

Ex. Noun: “Study” Answer: Yes! “Two studies were conducted.”



- Does the noun have both a singular and plural form?

Ex. Noun: “Flower” Answer: Yes! “Flower” is singular and “Flowers” is plural.



- Can the word “many” be used before the noun to modify it?

Ex. Noun: “Cup” Answer: Yes! “Many cups of sugar were used to make the cake.”

- Can the word “one” or the articles “a” or “an” be used to modify the noun?

Ex. Noun: “Pig” Answer: Yes! “One pig was rolling in the mud.”

OR “A pig was rolling in the mud.”

If you answer yes to these questions, then the noun is a **Count Noun!**

Mass Nouns

A noun is considered to be uncountable, or a *mass noun*, when it is impossible to use a number to represent how many of the *noun* exists. Instead, a mass noun is quantified by using a word that signifies an amount (e.g., cup, pound, foot), which is then followed by the preposition “of” prior to the mass noun.

Mass nouns may be:

- Materials, food, metals, and natural qualities: wood, bread, iron.
- Names of liquids, gases, and substances made of many small particles: oil, coffee, oxygen, sugar, salt, cement, gravel.
- Names of languages: English, Spanish, Latin, French, Sanskrit, Chinese.
- Most gerunds: looking, burning, swimming, running.
 - Gerunds are “-ing” words that look like verbs, but are used as nouns in sentences.



Examples:

- ❖ The noun “wood” is uncountable because a *number* cannot be used to represent how much wood was split and stacked.

Incorrect: “50 woods were split and stacked for the wood stove.”

Correct: “A cord of wood was split and stacked for the wood stove.”

- ❖ The noun “food” is uncountable because a *number* cannot be used to represent how much food was donated.

Incorrect: “There were 100 foods donated for a local charity event.”

Correct: “There were several pounds of food donated for a local charity event.”



- ❖ The noun “cement” is uncountable because a *number* cannot be used to represent how much cement was used to make a side walk.

Incorrect: “Twenty cements were used to make the side walk.”

Correct: “A bag of cement was used to make the side walk.”



To check if the noun is a Mass Noun, ask yourself:

- Does a word signifying an amount need to be used to modify the noun?

Ex. Noun: “Flour” Answer: Yes! “A cup of flour was used in the recipe.”

- Does the word “of” need to be used before the noun in order to modify it?

Ex. Noun: “Coffee” Answer: Yes! “I usually drink a cup of coffee in the morning.”

- Does the noun have only a singular form?

Ex. Noun: “Smoke” Answer: Yes! “Smoke” is singular and does not have a plural form.

If you answer yes to these questions, then the noun is a **Mass Noun**!

The following resources were consulted in the design of this handout:

“Grammar Handbook: Mass and Count Nouns.” *Writers Workshop: Writer Resources*. The Center for Writing Studies at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008. Web. March 2009.

Harris, Muriel. *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*. 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008. Print.

Rodrigues, Dawn and Tuman, Myron. *A Norton Pocket Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. Print.

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