Articles (Definite and Indefinite) + Count and Noncount Nouns

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Articles

An article modifies the noun that follows it. These words are used as a determiner, or a reference point, to identify that noun. English has three articles: the, a, and an.

Definite Article: the

The signals that the noun that follows is definite; it refers to a specific member of a group that is exact and known:

- “The man in the purple car waved to me.” It is a specific man, the one in the purple car.
- “I help the lady who lives next door.” It is a specific lady, the one who lives next door.
- “Let’s read the book.” It is a specific book, one that is known to the audience.

Indefinite Articles: a and an

A and an signal that the noun that follows is indefinite; it refers to any member of a group that is unspecific or unknown:

- “My son really wants a new toy.” There is no specific toy in mind.
- “Hand me an egg.” There is no specific egg in mind.
- “Let’s read a book.” There is no specific book in mind.

In English, indefinite articles are also used to indicate membership in a group:

- “I am a musician.” I am a member of a large group known as musicians.
- “Steve is an Australian.” Steve is a member of the people from Australia.

Distinguishing between a and an

The general rule is to use a before words starting with a consonant and to use an before words beginning with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u). However, there are some exceptions. In these cases, whether to use a or an depends on the first sound of the noun being modified. The -n in an is added in order to separate two vowel sounds, making them distinctive so that the vowels in two different words don’t get mixed together. When determining whether to choose a or an, use your ears, not your eyes:

- a modifies singular nouns beginning with a consonant sound: a book, a pencil, a horse, a man.
  - …even if the word starts with a vowel, if the first sound is a consonant use a:
    - a European, a unit, an eulogy, a one-hit wonder.
  - European, unit, and eulogy starts with a “y” sound; one-hit wonder a “wh” sound
- an modifies singular nouns beginning with a vowel sound: an egg, an apple, an orphan.
  - …even if the word starts with a consonant, if the first sound is a vowel, use an:
    - an hour, an M&M, an F chord, an NFL player.
  - hour start with an “ow” sound; M&M an “em” sound; F an “ef” sound; and NFL an “en” sound
- In some cases, the article does not come directly before the noun it is modifying. When an adjective is in between, the choice between a and an depends on the initial sound of the adjective, not the noun:
  - a big elephant (“big” starts with a consonant sound)
  - a European country (“European” starts with a consonant “y” sound)
  - an interesting theory (“interesting” starts with a vowel sound)

Zero article: Nouns that appear without a, an, or the are called zero article. Using zero article allows you to make generalizations. Zero article can be used with plural nouns (grades, teachers), noncount nouns (homework, water), and proper nouns (George, New York). For example:

- Professors regularly hold office hours. (Generalized with a plural noun)
- Water is readily available. (Generalized with a noncount noun)
- Professor Rodriguez regularly holds office hours. (Generalized with a proper noun)
Count and Noncount Nouns

Count Nouns: refer to separate things that can be counted individually. They normally refer to a noun that has a plural form (ex: ducks, sweaters, emotions, etc). Therefore, words can be singular count (ex: duck) and plural count (ex: ducks).

Noncount Nouns: refer to masses or collections without distinct, separate parts. These nouns do not have a plural or are inherently plural, so it will not make sense if you try to count them (ex: milk, not milks; money, not monies; knowledge, not knowledges; etc).

Mass nouns: refer to materials (flour, water) or abstractions (information, work) that cannot be counted since they are made up of an unknown quantity.
Collective nouns: refer to generic unit nouns (fruit, jewelry) or non-plural nouns that end in -s (mathematics, news).

BE CAREFUL! Some words can be both count and noncount depending on use and meaning.

● Example: The model was known for her lovely skin. The women were known for collecting animal skins.
● In the first instance, skin refers to one mass of skin, the model’s, and is therefore noncount. In the second instance skins refers to an assortment of individual animal skins (hides) the women had collected, so they are count nouns.

Adjectives with Count and Noncount Nouns:
Sometimes using a count or noncount noun can alter what adjective you can use. Here are a few examples:

● Some/Any
  ○ Some and any can be used for both count and noncount nouns.
    ■ Ex: There is some water in the fridge, and some kids will drink it.
    ■ Ex: At the lost and found, we will throw away any sweaters, but not any homework.

● Much/Many
  ○ Much only applies to noncount nouns.
    ■ Ex: There is not much milk in the carton. He did not have much knowledge on the subject.
  ○ Many only applies to count nouns.
    ■ Ex: The store sold many sweaters featuring many colors. There were too many emotions running through her mind.

● A little bit of
  ○ A little bit of only modifies noncount nouns.
    ■ Ex: There is a little bit of milk left in the carton.

● Little/Few
  ○ Little applies only to noncount nouns.
    ■ Ex: There’s only a little milk left in the carton. He had little knowledge on the subject.
  ○ Few modifies only count nouns.
    ■ Ex: The store sold few sweaters featuring few colors. There were few emotions running through her mind.

Works Consulted:
The Everyday Writer, 5th ed. (Lunsford); The Longman Pocket Writer’s Companion, 3rd ed. (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth); Purdue University Online Writing Lab (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/); Azusa Pacific University Writing Center (apu.edu/writingcenter/)