

ARTICLE USAGE AND COUNT AND NONCOUNT NOUNS

ARTICLES

Articles are words that modify nouns. They function as limiting adjectives to help us understand which person, place, thing, or concept is being discussed.

The is the definite article. It is used when both the speaker and listener or the writer and reader are referring to the same specific thing.

A/an is the indefinite article. It is used when the noun is not specifically identified, either because it is an abstract symbol or a nonspecific thing.

A is used with indefinite nouns that begin with consonant sounds. **A** is also used with indefinite nouns that begin with vowel sounds if they are preceded by an adjective that begins with a consonant sound.

a tree **a** mouse **a** user **a** holistic approach **a** fierce orangutan

An is used with indefinite nouns that begin with vowel sounds. **An** is also used with indefinite nouns that begin with consonant sounds if they are preceded by an adjective that begins with a vowel sound.

an apple **an** hour **an** ulcer **an** ice cube **an** extraordinary journey

Choosing which article to use can be a challenge. One must consider a number of factors, including whether the noun being modified is count or noncount and whether it is singular or plural. One must also consider whether the noun is generic, indefinite, or definite. Continue reading to find out more about these factors.

COUNT AND NONCOUNT NOUNS

Count nouns can be counted; they can be expressed in plural form.

book	tiger	airplane	bottle	elbow	idea	table
books	tigers	airplanes	bottles	elbows	ideas	tables

Noncount nouns cannot be counted; they cannot be expressed in plural form.

money	air	peace	evidence	skiing	chess	rain
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Note: Some nouns have both a count meaning and a noncount meaning. Typically, the count meaning is concrete (it refers to the actual thing) and the noncount meaning is abstract (it refers to the idea of the thing). Compare the following nouns in their count meanings and their noncount meanings:

COUNT

Our lives are shaped by our relationships.

The words *lives* and *life* refer to actual lives — the individual lives people live in this world.

Her life was shaped by her relationships.

A balanced diet of vitamin-rich foods will help to maintain good health.

The words *foods* and *food* refer to actual foods — the individual foods that sustain us.

Spinach is a vitamin-rich food.

The sounds of the city kept her awake all night.

The words *sounds* and *sound* refer to actual sounds — the individual sounds of the city and her husband's snoring.

The sound of her husband's snoring kept her awake all night.

NONCOUNT

Life is full of ups and downs.

The word *life* does not refer to an actual life; rather, it refers to the idea of life.

If you wish you be healthy, you must eat good food and exercise regularly.

The word *food* does not refer to an actual food; rather, it refers to the idea of food.

Hearing is the sense with which we perceive sound.

The word *sound* does not refer to an actual sound; rather, it refers to the idea of sound.

To choose the correct article or other limiting adjective, one must take into account not only whether the noun being modified is count or noncount or singular or plural; one must also consider what sense is given to the noun: is it generic, indefinite, or definite?

Generic nouns are used to make generalizations. Generic nouns do not represent actual things in the world; rather, they function as abstract symbols of a whole group. Generic nouns (identified here with underlining) take articles in the following ways:

Singular Count Noun	a	A <u>song</u> tells a story.
Plural Count Noun	∅	∅ <u>Songs</u> tell stories.
Noncount Noun	∅	∅ <u>Music</u> tells stories.

Indefinite nouns refer to actual things in the world; however, those things are not specifically identified. Indefinite nouns (identified here with underlining) take articles and other limiting adjectives in the following ways:

Singular Count Noun	a	The band played a <u>song</u> .
Plural Count Noun	∅ or some, three, several, many, plenty of, a few, a lot of, no, etc.	The band played <u>several</u> songs .
Noncount Noun	∅ or some, little, much, plenty of, a lot of, a little bit of, no, etc.	The band played <u>some</u> music .

Definite nouns refer to actual things which are specifically identified. In other words, nouns are definite when both the speaker and listener or the writer and reader are referring to the same specific thing. Definite nouns (identified here with underlining) take articles in the following ways:

Singular Count Noun	the	<u>The</u> song they played was beautiful.
Plural Count Noun	the	<u>The</u> songs they played were beautiful.
Noncount Noun	the	<u>The</u> music they played was beautiful.