

# Articles

Articles are words that come before nouns (or sometimes adjectives) to indicate meaning of the noun or clarify how specific the noun is. The most common articles are *the*, *a*, *an*. Another article that is sometimes used is *some*.

## Definite v. Indefinite

*The* is a definite article. It can be used with both mass and count nouns (see below).

*A/An* are indefinite articles. They can be used only with count nouns that have not been specified.

*Some* is an indefinite article used with plural count nouns and all mass nouns.

When trying to determine when/how to use articles, keep the following questions in mind:

1. Is the noun a mass noun or a count noun? If it is a count noun, is it singular or plural?
2. Does the noun give new information, or is the information already known?
3. Is the noun being used to make a generalization? (Lester, 2001, p. 319)

## 1. Mass and Count Nouns

Mass nouns are not able to be counted with number words and cannot be used in the plural form. They cannot be used with *a* or *an*. Count nouns are unrestricted and can be counted. They can be used with *the*, *a*, and *an*. The examples below show the limitations of mass nouns by comparing *furniture* (mass) and *chair* (count).

(Plural)

Count: The *chairs* are arranged around the room. (correct)

Mass: The *furnitures* are arranged around the room. (incorrect)

(Counted with number words)

Count: Three *chairs* are arranged around the room. (correct)

Mass: Three *furnitures* are arranged around the room. (incorrect)

(a/an)

Count: A *chair* is placed in the room. (correct)

Mass: A *furniture* is placed in the room. (incorrect)

Mass nouns are often used to refer to entire categories of things. For example, the mass noun *luggage* refers to an entire category of objects used to carry personal belongings, including brief cases, backpacks, suitcases, etc. Count nouns can refer to one particular kind of carrying device. So *luggage* is a mass noun, whereas the kinds of luggage (brief cases, backpacks, suitcases, etc.) are count nouns.

Use the following table (adapted from Lester, 2001, p. 323) to determine which article to use.

Type of Noun	Definite Article	Indefinite Article
Count – Singular	<i>The</i>	<i>A/An</i>
Count – Plural	<i>The</i>	<i>Some</i>
Mass	<i>The</i>	<i>Some</i>

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## 2. New vs. Already Known Information

Consider the following sentences:

- I saw *the* dog in front of my house.
- I saw *a* dog in front of my house.

Using the definite article *the* means that the writer is discussing a particular dog and the writer is assuming that the reader already knows which dog he/she is referring to. Using the definite article *the* with a noun indicates that the noun is known information.

Using the indefinite article *a* (in the above example), *an*, or *some* means that the writer knows the noun information is new to the reader. The writer is assuming that the reader does not already know which dog he/she is referring to.

When we choose definite or indefinite articles, we, as writers, are making assumptions about the status of the information we are providing. If it is established information, use a definite article. If it is new information, use an indefinite article.

## 3. Making a Generalization

According to Lester (2001), the normal rule is that common nouns need to be preceded by an article or other pre-noun modifier. The one exception is that mass and plural count nouns are used *without* articles or other pre-noun modifiers *to signal that we are making a generalization*.

Example:

Mass noun:            *Yogurt* is really tangy.  
                             The *yogurt* that I bought is really tangy.

In the first sentence, the absence of an article lets the reader know that the writer is making a generalization about yogurt. In the second sentence, presence of an article (*the*) lets us know that there is not a generalization; the writer is referring to specific yogurt that he/she just bought.

Example:

Plural count noun:    *Hats* are very colorful and useful.  
                             The *hats* in this store are very colorful and useful.

In the first sentence, again the absence of an article lets the reader know that the writer is making a generalization about all hats. In the second sentence, the presence of an article lets us know that the writer is referring to specific hats in a particular place.

The information for this handout was compiled from the following source:

Lester, M. (2001). *Grammar and usage in the classroom* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Steer, J. M., & Carlisi, K. A. (1998). *The advanced grammar book* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

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