

Articles with Count & Non-Count Nouns

Before articles can be used correctly, it is important to understand how count and non-count nouns are used.

A count noun is a noun that can be counted.

I mailed a letter. Mahmoud mailed five letters. (*Letter* is a count noun; *letters* are countable.)

A non-count noun cannot be counted.

Yesterday, I received some mail. (*Mail* is a non-count noun; while we cannot count *mail* in general, we can count *pieces of mail*.)

We generally place a or an before a singular count noun.

We add s or es to the plural count noun, but no article is used.

A letter arrived for me yesterday. (any letter—a nonspecific letter)

Letters from abroad are always welcome.

The store downtown has a nice selection of cheap **watches**.

Singular: a letter, one letter (an envelope)

Plural: letters (no article), five letters, some letters, many letters, watches, five watches, some watches.

A or an is not placed in front of a non-count noun.

A non-count noun does not end in s or es because it has no plural form. (It can help to think of the non-count noun as a unit.)

Too much mail was in my mailbox. (Singular—no plural form: mail, some mail, a lot of mail)

Points to Remember

1. Think of non-count nouns as **one single unit made up of many distinct items**: *mail* is made up of more than one *letter*.

I wish I got mail every day; rarely do I get a letter.

OR **an unspecified quantity made up of smaller elements**, such as *coffee*.

They buy coffee at the market only if it is organic.

Note: For particular quantities we often say, *a piece of mail* or *a cup of coffee*.

2. Many non-count nouns are **abstract words or concepts** which do not have a concrete shape and therefore cannot be counted.

Health is more important than money.

3. Finally, to complicate things, many nouns are **used as both non-count or count nouns**, and sometimes this changes the meaning.

Anemic people are often deficient in iron.

I left the iron on when I went out.

I have curly hair.

She found a hair in her soup.

Groups of Nouns Used as Non-Count Nouns

Practice writing in any nouns you can think of that would fit in each category:

1. **A single unit made up of many items**
(e.g., food, luggage, equipment)
1. **An unspecified quantity made up of smaller elements**
(e.g., water (fluid), ice (solid), gas (oxygen), sugar (individual elements))
1. **Abstract concepts and nature/weather related words**
(e.g., sleep, beauty, education, importance, news, advice, space, time, work, leisure, vocabulary, courage)

NOTE: Other non-count nouns include fields of study (engineering), languages (Spanish), and activities (soccer).

Article Usage

Articles are used to introduce nouns and are often called determiners. They help us determine what type of noun will follow—a definite one, which is usually specific, or an indefinite or general one, which can mean the noun refers to any thing, not a particular thing.

The (pronounced *thee* before a vowel and *thuh* before a consonant) is used to refer to or draw attention to a particular or definite person or thing. **A** or **an** (used before words with a vowel) is used when we want to refer to something that is general or not definite.

We drop the article when we are talking about something in a general way. Plural and non-count nouns are not preceded by an article when we use them in a non-specific way.

Generic Nouns: using *a* or [no article]

Definite Noun: using *the*

Indefinite Nouns: using *a* or *some*

Rules

Use 'a,' 'an,' 'one,' 'every,' 'the,' 'this,' 'that' or 'my' for a singular count noun.

I ate a/the/that potato.

I ate my potato.

Exception: How much fibre does a potato have?

A potato has 9 grams of fibre. (*Don't use the for the second mention of this generic noun.*)

Use 'the' when you are talking about a specific thing or person if you think your listener/reader is familiar with it or them.

The moon is bright tonight.

Please speak to the secretary before going into the office.

Turn off the light!

Maureen works in the room at the back of the library.

Use 'the' for second mention of an indefinite noun.

First mention: *a* or *some*

Second mention: *the*

Here is a favourite example from [Azar's grammar book](#):

I saw some dogs. The dogs were chasing a cat. The cat was chasing a mouse. The mouse ran into a hole. The hole was very small.

Remember NOT to use 'the' with plural count (potatoes) or non-count (coffee) nouns when generalizing.

- ✗ The potatoes are a healthy and comforting food to eat.
- ✓ Potatoes are a healthy and comforting food to eat.
- ✗ The coffee is Donna's favourite thing in the whole world.
- ✓ Coffee is Donna's favourite thing in the whole world.