

65 articles (5): more about a/an

1 countable and uncountable nouns

Countable nouns are the names of separate objects, people, ideas etc which we can count.

a cat – three cats
a secretary – four secretaries
a plan – two plans

Uncountable nouns are the names of materials, liquids and other things which we do not usually see as separate objects.

wool (BUT NOT ~~a wool, two-wools~~)
water (BUT NOT ~~a water, three-waters~~)
weather (BUT NOT ~~a weather, four-weather~~)
energy (BUT NOT ~~an energy, several-energies~~)

2 a/an with singular countable nouns

We normally use *a/an* only with singular countable nouns.

a secretary an office
BUT NOT ~~a seat~~ OR ~~an offices~~

For expressions like *a good two hours*, see 532.6.

3 uses of a/an

A/an does not add much to the meaning of a noun – it is like a weak form of 'one'. It has several common uses.

a one person or thing

We can use *a/an* when we talk about one person or thing.

There's a police car outside.
My brother's married to a doctor. Andy lives in an old house.

b any one member of a class.

We can use *a/an* when we talk about any one member of a class.

A doctor must like people. (= any doctor)
I would like to live in an old house. (= any old house)

c classifying and defining

We can use *a/an* when we classify or define people and things – when we say what they are, what job they do, or what they are used for.

She's a doctor.
I'm looking forward to being a grandmother.
A glider is a plane with no engine.
Don't use your plate as an ashtray.

d descriptions

A/an is common before nouns that are used in descriptions.

She's a nice person. That was a lovely evening.
He's got a friendly face. It's an extremely hot day.

4 when a/an cannot be left out

We do not normally leave out *a/an* in negative expressions, after prepositions or after fractions.

Lend me your pen. ~ I haven't got a pen. (NOT ~~I haven't got pen.~~)
You mustn't go out without a coat. (NOT ~~...without coat.~~)
three-quarters of a pound (NOT ~~three-quarters of pound~~)

And we do not leave out *a/an* when we say what jobs people have, or how things are used (see above).

She's an engineer. (NOT ~~She's engineer.~~)
I used my shoe as a hammer. (NOT ~~...as hammer.~~)

5 when a/an is not used: adjectives alone; possessives

A/an cannot normally be used with an adjective alone (without a noun). Compare:

It's a good car. It's good. (NOT ~~It's a good.~~)

A/an cannot be used together with a possessive. Instead, we can use the structure *a ... of mine/yours* etc (see 443).

He's a friend of mine. (NOT ~~He's a my friend.~~)

6 a/an and the

Instead of *a/an*, we use *the* when we want to say 'You and I both know which one I mean'. Compare:

She lives in a big house. (The hearer doesn't know which one.)
She lives in the big house over there. (The hearer knows which one.)

For details, see 64.

7 a and an: the difference

We do not normally pronounce the sound /ə/ before a vowel. So before a vowel, the article *a* (/ə/) changes to *an*. Compare:

a rabbit a lemon an elephant an orange

The choice between *a* and *an* depends on pronunciation, not spelling. We use *an* before a vowel sound, even if it is written as a consonant.

an hour /ən 'aʊər/ an MP /ən em 'pi:/

And we use *a* before a consonant sound, even if it is written as a vowel.

a university /ə ju:'ni:vɜ:sə'ti/ a one-pound coin /ə 'wʌn .../

Some people say *an*, not *a*, before words beginning with *h* if the first syllable is unstressed.

an hotel (a hotel is more common)
an historic occasion (a historic ... is more common)
(BUT NOT ~~an housewife~~ – the first syllable is stressed.)

A is sometimes pronounced /eɪ/ before a hesitation, when we want to emphasise the following word, or when we want to make a contrast with *the*.

I think I'll have a /eɪ/ – chocolate ice cream.
It's a /eɪ/ reason – it's not the only reason.

66 articles (6): no article with plural and uncountable nouns

1 a/an not used

Plural and uncountable nouns (e.g. *cats, wool* – see 65.1) cannot normally be used with *a/an* (because *a/an* has a similar meaning to 'one'). Instead, we most often use no article.

There were cats in every room. (NOT ~~...a cats...~~)
Doctors generally work long hours. He's got very big ears.
Her coat is made of pure wool.
What's that? ~ I think it's pepper.

2 confusing nouns

Some nouns that are countable in some other languages are uncountable in English (see 148.3 for a list).

I need information and advice. (NOT ~~...an information and an advice~~)
You've made very good progress. (NOT ~~...a very good progress.~~)

And note that we never use *a/an* with *weather* or *English*.

We're having terrible weather. (NOT ~~...a terrible weather.~~)
She speaks very good English. (NOT ~~...a very good English.~~)

3 some and any

Instead of no article, we can sometimes use *some* or *any*.

We met some nice French girls on holiday.
Have you got any matches?

For details, see 67.

4 the

Instead of no article, we use *the* when we want to say 'You and I both know which I mean' (see 64). Compare:

– I'm working with children. (The hearer doesn't know which ones.)

– How are the children? (= the hearer's children)

– We need salt. (= any salt)

– Could you pass the salt? (The hearer can see the salt that is wanted.)

But we usually use no article, not *the*, to talk about people, things etc in general (see 68).

Are dogs more intelligent than cats? (NOT ~~...the dogs...the cats~~)
Everybody likes music. (NOT ~~...the music~~)

▲ For expressions like *a coffee, a knowledge of Spanish*, see 148.4, 6.

Have you got any coffee?
Could I have two coffees?

67 articles (7): the difference between some/any and no article

1 use with uncountable and plural nouns

Uncountable and plural nouns can often be used either with *some/any* or with no article. There is not always a great difference of meaning.

We need (some) cheese. I didn't buy (any) eggs.

Some is used especially in affirmative sentences; *any* is more common in questions and negatives (for details, see 547).

2 some/any or no article?

We prefer *some/any* when we are thinking about limited but rather indefinite numbers or quantities – when we don't know, care or say exactly how much/many. We prefer no article when we are thinking about unlimited numbers or quantities, or not thinking about numbers/quantities at all. Compare:

– We've planted some roses in the garden. (A limited number; the speaker doesn't say how many.)

I like roses. (No idea of number.)

– We got talking to some students. (A limited number.)

Our next-door neighbours are students. (The main idea is classification, not number.)

– I've just bought some books on computing. (A limited number.)

There were books on the desk, on the floor, on the chairs, ... (A large number.)

– Would you like some more rice? (An indefinite amount – as much as the listener wants.)

We need rice, sugar, eggs, butter, beer, and toilet paper. (The speaker is thinking just of the things that need to be bought, not of the amounts.)

– Is there any water in the fridge? (The speaker wants a limited amount.)

Is there water on the moon? (The interest is in the existence of water, not the amount.)

– This engine hardly uses any petrol. (The interest is in the amount.)

This engine doesn't use petrol. (The interest is in the type of fuel, not the amount.)

We do not use *some/any* when it is clear exactly how much/many we are talking about. Compare:

– You've got some great books.

You've got pretty toes. (A definite number – ten. You've got some pretty toes would suggest that the speaker is not making it clear how many – perhaps six or seven!)

■ accommodation, advice, baggage, behaviour, bread, equipment, chaos, damage, furniture, information, knowledge, lightning, luck, luggage, money, news, permission, poetry, progress, publicity, research, rubbish, slang, scenery, thunder, traffic, vocabulary, weather, work ...

ARTICLES

II

▲ words for materials are uncountable, but we can use the same words as a countable to refer to something made of the material (paper, glass)
f.e., I'd like some typing paper.

I'm going to buy a paper (= a newspaper)

• nouns for materials, liquids can be countable when they are used to talk about different types

f.e. Not all washing powders are kind to clothes.
We have a selection of fine wines.