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Articles: *A*, *The*, or *Nothing*?

The key to using the English articles **[a], [the], or [nothing]** begins with two simple questions:

1. Is the noun *countable* or *uncountable*?
2. Is the noun *definite* or *indefinite*?

For the December REAL ENGLISH, we are going to focus on **countable versus uncountable**

There are three basic categories of nouns:

(1) countable nouns, (2) uncountable and
(3) those that can be either countable nouns or uncountable.

Countable means that the noun can be counted: a book = 1; two books = 2; several books = more than 3. You can usually 'see' countable nouns ... and 'see' them as they increase in number from 1 to 2 to 3, ...

Uncountable means that the noun is something that: (1) cannot be divided or (2) is an abstract concept. *Bread* cannot be divided (*until it becomes separate slices of bread*). In the same manner, *love* cannot be divided; it is an abstract concept of human emotion.

However, there are **nouns that are both**: “I like chocolate” (as an uncountable noun – the basic flavor of chocolate) and “I like to have a chocolate after dinner” (a single piece of chocolate candy).

Of course, the problem with English is that there is nothing in the form of the noun that tells you whether it is countable or non-countable ... you have to use your 'language sense.'

All right ... let's try some examples for **Countable Nouns**:

I have a book, she has five books, but he has a box full of books. [*the box has many books!*]

She has two sisters and a younger brother. I don't have any sisters or brothers. [negative = any]

It is crazy at that house – they are always some chickens running around making noise.

[some = I don't know how many, but more than 3]

No one buys cameras any more – after all, there is a camera in your smart phone.

[no one = negative everyone]

I have a couple of magazines for the train ride; I don't like the magazines they sell at the KIOSK.
[mine are 'a couple' ... the KIOSK has many different magazines]

Uncountable Nouns:

Ideas and experiences: *advice, information, progress, news, luck, fun, work*

Materials and substances: *water, rice, gold, milk, bread*

Weather: *weather, rain, snow, thunder, lightning*

Category names: *furniture, equipment, rubbish or garbage, luggage*

Others: *homework, knowledge, money, research, travel, paperwork*

We are going to get new furniture for our house. / The weather has been terrible recently. /
There has been interesting research about that. / The newspaper is full of local information. /

Why study? It increases our knowledge. / Don't chase money – chase experience. /

I have milk, eggs, rice, soup and chocolate for breakfast every day.

We can add quantity, quality and determiner:

She bought some very expensive furniture for her apartment.

She bought a very expensive piece of furniture for her apartment.

I think I have enough rice for winter. I got two bags of rice – that should be enough.

I got some information about study abroad programs yesterday.

The information they gave me will help me decide which study-abroad program I want.

What is with you? I talk about current events – but you never know any news.

Have you heard the news? Kenji's getting married.

They say teachers don't give much homework these days. But I have homework for six classes!

I have been having some bad luck recently. Unfortunately, luck isn't spread equally or evenly.

Uncountable nouns used as Countable nouns

May I have two teas and a coffee please?

I would like a cup of coffee to drink here and two cups of tea to go.

Education is important. [general: uncountable]

A good education is important for your future. [specific: countable]

Time passes more and more quickly as you get older [general: uncountable]

I had a great time at the party last weekend – let's do it again. [specific: countable]

The money you make in life disappears – so you should seek meaningful experiences.

Nouns that can be used in either form – but with different meanings

There is some juice on the table. [This is a reference to the drink called juice – uncountable.]

There are some juices on the table. [This is a reference to 'packs' of juices – countable.]

Questions, Answers and Negative Statements

Is there an email address to contact? Yes, there is (one). No, there isn't (one).

Are there any chairs I can use? Yes, there are (some). No, there aren't (any).
Do we have any bread? Yes, there is some on the table. No, there isn't any. Sorry.
Do we have some bread? What? Can't you see? There are six slices (of bread) right there.

Special Cases

I got some new glasses yesterday – how do they look?
I had some new glass put in the window – it was starting to crack and was very dangerous.
I bought a new pair of pants for the Christmas Party.
Wow - those pants must have cost a lot of money.
I lost my gloves last night, so now I have to buy a new pair (of gloves).

A final quiz: Choose the correct form for these sentences: (Answers in Volume 22–January 2025!)

1. Wow – you are [*a / the / nothing*] good cook.
[*A / The / nothing*] pasta [*is / are*] delicious!
2. Are you [*a / the / nothing*] healthy eater?
How [*much / many*] fruit do you eat in a week?
3. I need some new [*furniture / furnitures*]. [*A / The / nothing*] stuff I have is worn out.
But [*a / the / nothing*] furniture is so expensive now. Be careful.
4. I'm looking for a new [*work / job*] ...
... one that doesn't include such difficult [*work / job*].
5. I know I should read [*a / the / nothing*] newspaper. (two options are possible)
But the news [*is / are*] so depressing sometimes.
6. If you want to communicate in English, you need a lot of [*vocabulary / vocabularies*].
[*Word is / Words*] are fundamental to language.

Next REAL ENGLISH: January 2025!

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