

## THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE

Note. Drills should be repeated daily for approximately two weeks.

### 1.1 FORM: A OR AN?

#### Examples

a cat	a bank	a movie
an ant	an egg	an idea
an onion	an upset	an hour
a university	a hotel	a happening

A is used before consonants and sounded u (university).

An is used before a word beginning with a, e, i, o, u, and silent h (hour).

Exercise. Drill. Read through (always, if possible, read aloud) completing:

- ..... ant
- ..... egg
- ..... Indian
- ..... university
- ..... understanding
- ..... hour
- ..... hotel
- ..... house
- ..... upset
- ..... interesting idea
- ..... open door
- ..... hors d'oeuvres
- ..... universal truth
- ..... uniform
- ..... holiday
  
- ..... useful gadget
- ..... union
- ..... unicycle
- ..... honour
- ..... unicorn
- ..... M.P.
- ..... Member of Parliament
- ..... unit
- ..... history of clocks
- ..... U.N. member
- ..... United Nations member
- ..... R.C.
- ..... Roman Catholic
- ..... Hindu
- ..... undertaker

### 1.2 INDEFINITE ARTICLE: SINGULAR

Look at these examples:

dogs	a dog	cats	a cat
machines	a machine	flies	a fly
children	a child	people	a person
eggs	an egg	police	a policeman

Drill. Read through, putting the following into the singular:

- In suburban streets, doors opened.
- Men hurried to the station to catch trains to the city.
- Dogs will gnaw bones; cats will eat herrings.
- Teachers have classrooms to teach students in.
- Offices need computers, fax machines and telephones.
- Lively tunes cheer people up.
- Businessmen need to know foreign languages.
- Roses are roses are roses.
- Children like presents.

### 1.3 THE MEANING OF "INDEFINITE"

Dictionary synonyms for "indefinite" are: unidentified, unspecified, inexact, collective, generic.

A(N) is general in reference; it refers to one of many; a type rather than an individual. It is a reference to someone or something at that moment not specifically known to you. When using A(N), however, you should be aware that degrees of exactness are possible. For example, in reply to the question

What bit you?

you can reply:

An animal.  
A dog.  
A poodle.  
A white poodle.

Despite the exactness of "a white poodle". this dog remains indefinite. Of course, we can go to extreme lengths:

A white poodle with one black ear and a pink collar.

This poodle, although indefinite in grammar, is clearly well-defined in real life.

Drill. Read through, completing with A(N):

- ..... fish ..... herring  
..... red herring ..... North Sea  
herring
- ..... man ..... worker  
..... office worker .....  
white-collar worker
- ..... building ..... house  
..... public house ..... noisy  
public house
- ..... plant ..... flower  
..... rose ..... English rose
- ..... radio ..... short-wave  
radio ..... Japanese short-wave radio
- ..... thief ..... car thief  
..... young car thief

#### 1.4 A(N) IN REPLY TO "WHAT SORT OF..."

A(N) is often used in answer to the questions

- What sort of...?
- What kind of...?
- What class (type, variety)...?

The answer may have the verb "to be":

- He is a doctor.
- The dog was a poodle.
- Mr Grummett is a football fan.

Exercise. Give three or four answers, using the indefinite article, to these questions. The first one has been done for you.

1. What sort of car was it? It was a Cadillac. It was a red sports car. An old wreck. It was a high-powered Formula 1 racing car.
2. What kind of car was she driving?
3. What kind of flower is it?
3. What type of dog does he own?
4. What sort of radio will you buy?
5. What sort of restaurant do you like?
6. What does he do for a living?
7. What are you buying Kim for her birthday?

#### 1.5 A(N) USED IN EXPRESSIONS OF QUANTITY

The indefinite article is used in certain expressions of quantity. There are three types, as follows:

##### 1. measurements

- a million light-years
- a thousand spectators
- half a dozen eggs
- a kilogram
- three times a day
- once an hour
- half a minute
- a quarter of a pound
- a third of a gram
- a litre of oil
- a gallon of petrol

##### 2. indeterminate amounts, such as

- a bit of string
- a piece of cake
- a slice of ham
- a loaf of bread
- a bottle of champagne
- a spoonful of sugar
- a pot of marmalade
- a drop of whisky
- a dab of paint
- a spot of bother
- a game of tennis
- a round of golf
- a bit of difficulty

##### 3. phrases of general quantity, such as

- a few problems
- a little difficulty
- a lot of interest
- many a man
- a great deal of trouble
- a large amount of money
- a good number of people

Drill. Read through, completing:

1. It is..... 100 miles from here to there.
2. It will take more than one and..... half hours to drive there.
3. Give me..... kilo of apples, half..... kilo of satsumas, and..... quarter of..... kilo of peppers.
4. He took..... lot of trouble over the job.
5. I'll have..... little jam on my toast.
6. The new product generated..... lot of interest, but only..... few people bought it.
7. She bought..... small loaf of bread and..... large bottle of red wine.
8. .... spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.
9. All I have for breakfast is..... slice of toast and..... cup of black coffee.

Exercise. Complete the sentences using a word/phrase and a(an):

- The doctor told Mrs Grummett to take..... of medicine three times..... after meals.
- At a greengrocer's you can buy.....  
.....of apples and.....  
.....of radishes or grapes.
- It took..... of time and..... of money to start up the business.
- He had..... difficulty at first, but..... of hard work soon solved the problem.
- For breakfast, a Scotsman will eat.....  
..... of porridge mixed with.....  
..... of whisky.
- For lunch, an Englishman will go to a pub and have a sandwich and..... of beer.

## 1.6 UNCOUNTABLES

Uncountable (or non-count) nouns do not take the indefinite article.  
Uncountable are

1. nouns that refer to quantities in bulk or in mass:

concrete	mortar
butter	honey
plutonium	oxygen
bacon	tea
dust	rubbish

2. abstract nouns:

patience	bother
brotherhood	literature
truth	agility
history	science
music	capitalism
golf	tuberculosis
tennis	fun

3. collective nouns with no plural:

machinery	luggage
furniture	information
news	advice
cutlery	rubbish

4. names of meals: breakfast, brunch, lunch, tea, dinner, supper (Although, if you ran a restaurant, you might "a dinner". Why?.)

Exercise. Drill. Which of these words normally take A(N)? Underline the ones that normally do.

- dog cat boy insect flower cloud ocean disc car street
- waiter mountain verse cup slice health ambition dairy laptop road
- CD materialism child bread goat building information truth pen flour
- idea marmalade thought leaf music note circus furniture radium vote
- sailing bag luggage tea geography equality liberty male
- principle science reject milk patience golf dust magazine poetry oil
- garbage cream daytime advice craziness engineering news sugar dirt abstraction

Exercise. Complete with A(N), where needed:

- ..... library is full of..... books.
- ..... butter goes on..... bread.
- He spread..... pat of..... butter over ..... slice ..... bread and put ..... jam on it.
- ..... cats will drink..... milk.
- ..... cat will drink..... saucer of..... milk.
- ..... house is sometimes built of..... brick.
- The burglar used ..... brick to break..... window.
- ..... eagle is..... bird.
- ..... eye can be brown or blue.
- We saw..... movie on..... television.
- ..... orange has..... vitamins in it.
- ..... orange is..... bright colour.
- ..... child goes to..... school.
- Some people put..... sugar

in..... cup of..... tea.

15. What would you like for..... tea?

16. .... modern office block is built of..... glass and..... concrete.

17. .... city road is..... noisy place.

18. .... cat is..... kind of..... animal.

19. .... German speaks..... German.

20. .... French is..... difficult language.

21. .... room has..... door and..... window.

22. I would like..... drink of..... coffee.

23. .... money is the cause of..... evil.

### 1.7 COUNTABLE OR UNCOUNTABLE?

Whether a noun is countable or uncountable will depend on what it refers to. That is, how is the word being used? If what the noun refers to is countable, then the indefinite article can be used.

Compare

I'll have a beer. (refers to a glass of beer)  
with

Germany's most popular drink is beer. (refers to beer in the mass)

### THE UNCOUNTABLE EGG

Consider the following:

What did Mrs Grummett have for breakfast?

The answer may be either

She had egg.

or

She had an egg.

Why? Explain the differences between the two statements.

[She had egg. The egg here is the "idea" of egg. Egg, that is, and not bacon, or sausage, or grilled tomato...

She had an egg. Easy! One egg. A countable egg.]

Exercise. In the following exercise, which sentence needs an article, and which doesn't? Explain why. When you have finished the exercise, what general conclusions do you reach?

1. The house was built of..... brick.  
He tripped over..... brick.

2. Windows are made of..... glass.  
I'd like..... glass of lager.

3. I need..... paper to find out what's on.  
..... paper is made from wood pulp.

4. He pressed the creases out with..... iron.  
They used..... iron to build the bridge.

5. The English and Germans drink..... beer.  
I'd like..... beer.

6. He picked up..... stone from the beach  
A sculptor works with..... stone.

7. The balloon was filled with..... gas.  
Carbon dioxide is..... gas.

8. All work and no play is not much of..... life.  
What is..... life?

9. He died of..... cancer.  
The politician said that unemployment was..... cancer destroying the fabric of society.

Exercise. Complete with A(N), as needed:

1. We have..... bacon and..... egg for..... breakfast.

2. We had..... slice of..... bacon and..... egg for..... change.

3. That student speaks..... English well.

4. .... Scotsman will sometimes speak..... English so different from received pronunciation it is impossible to understand him.

5. Mr Jones has..... bad temper.

6. He suffers from..... high blood pressure.

7. .... school should have..... tradition.

