

Using *a* and *an* appropriately

Use *a* (or *an*) with singular count nouns whose specific identity is not known to the reader.

Count nouns refer to persons, places, or things that can be counted: *one girl, two girls; one city, three cities; one apple, four apples*. Noncount nouns refer to entities or abstractions that cannot be counted: *water, steel, air, furniture, patience, knowledge*. It is important to remember that noncount nouns vary from language to language.

If a singular count noun names something not known to the reader — perhaps because it is being mentioned for the first time, perhaps because its specific identity is unknown even to the writer — the noun should be preceded by *a* or *an* unless it has been preceded by another noun marker. *A* (or *an*) usually means “one among many” but can also mean “any one.”

- ▶ Mary Beth arrived in ^alimousine.
- ▶ We are looking for ^{an}apartment close to the lake.

NOTE: *A* is used before a consonant sound: *a banana, a tree, a picture, a hand, a happy child*. *An* is used before a vowel sound: *an eggplant, an occasion, an uncle, an hour, an honorable person*. Notice that words beginning with *h* can have either a consonant sound (*hand, happy*) or a vowel sound (*hour, honorable*).

Do not use *a* (or *an*) with noncount nouns.

A (or *an*) is not used to mark noncount nouns, such as *sugar, gold, honesty, or jewelry*.

- ▶ Claudia asked her mother for ~~an~~ advice.

Commonly used noncount nouns

Food and drink

bacon, beef, bread, broccoli, butter, cabbage, candy, cauliflower, celery, cereal, cheese, chocolate, coffee, corn, cream, fish, flour, fruit, ice cream, meat, milk, oil, pasta, rice, salt, spinach, sugar, tea, water, wine

Nonfood substances

air, cement, coal, dirt, gasoline, gold, paper, petroleum, plastic, rain, silver, snow, soap, steel, wood, wool

Abstract nouns

advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, fun, happiness, health, honesty, information, intelligence, knowledge, love, poverty, satisfaction, truth, wealth

Other

biology (and other areas of study), clothing, equipment, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, lumber, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, traffic, transportation, violence, weather, work

NOTE: A few noncount nouns may also be used as count nouns, especially in informal English: *Bill loves chocolate; Bill offered me a chocolate. I'll have coffee; I'll have a coffee.*

(continued)

If you want to express an approximate amount, you can often use one of the following quantifiers with a noncount noun.

QUANTIFIER	NONCOUNT NOUN
a great deal of	candy, courage
a little	salt, rain
any	sugar, homework
enough	bread, wood, money
less	meat, violence
little (or a little)	knowledge, time
more	coffee, information
much (or a lot of)	snow, pollution
plenty of	paper, lumber
some	tea, news, work

To express a more specific amount, you can often precede a noncount noun with a unit word that is typically associated with it. Here are some common combinations.

A OR AN + UNIT + OF	NONCOUNT NOUNS
a bottle of	water, vinegar
a carton of	ice cream, milk, yogurt
an ear of	corn
a head of	cabbage, lettuce
a loaf of	bread
a piece of	meat, furniture, advice
a pound of	butter, sugar
a quart of	milk, ice cream
a slice of	bread, bacon

CAUTION: Noncount nouns do not have plural forms, and they should not be used with numbers or words suggesting plurality (such as *several*, *many*, *a few*, *a couple of*, *a number of*).

- ▶ We need some ~~informations~~ about rain forests.
- ▶ Do you have ^{much}~~many~~ money with you?
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- ▶ We bought new ~~furnitures~~ for our living room.