

ARTICLES

Articles podcast 1: a and an

Jeanne: Hello, I'm Jeanne McCarten

Mike: And I'm Mike McCarthy

Jeanne: In this podcast series, we want to help you to understand some tricky points of English grammar.

Mike: Yes, the kinds of things even very advanced users of English often need help with.

Jeanne: So, in the first two podcasts, *Articles 1 and 2*, we want to help you to use **a**, **an** and **the**.

Mike: And that's because those three little words – **a**, **an** and **the** - cause more trouble than even the most difficult long words for our students.

Jeanne: We won't solve all your problems with articles, but we'll give you a couple of rules of thumb ...

Mike: ... some guidelines that will help you make the right decisions to express the meanings you want to express

Jeanne: So, in this podcast, we'll look at **a** and **an**.

Jeanne: So, first some grammatical terminology.

Mike: **A** and **an** are called **articles** in English grammar. And articles are a type of **determiner**. Determiners are words which clarify or give information about a noun - they tell us things like which one? How many? Whose?

Jeanne: Determiners are words like *a*, *an*, *the*, *my*, *your*, *this*, *those*, *three*, *many*, etc.

Mike: Right. **A** and **an** are determiners, they are articles, and specifically, they are **the indefinite article**.

Jeanne: So, as you know, you use **a** before a consonant sound and **an** before a vowel sound. For example, *a book*, *a lesson* but *an essay*, *an experiment*.

Mike: Yes. That's the easy part. But what does the indefinite article mean? What does it do to a noun when you use it?

Jeanne: Well, first of all, it says that something is one member of a class, one example of something. So, **a** book is one example of those things we call 'books'. **An** essay is one example of those pieces of writing that we call 'essays'.

Mike: That's clear enough. But why do you have to use the indefinite article? Why can't you just say 'I have book' or 'I have to write essay' – the singular noun *book* or *essay* tells me it's just one!

- Jeanne: Ah, this where we need to think about nouns that we can count and nouns that we can't count –in other words **countable** and **uncountable** nouns. This is a tricky concept in English grammar.
- Mike: We call nouns like *essay, seminar, computer* countable nouns because we can count them, for example, *two essays, three seminars, four computers*.
- Jeanne: But in English grammar, some things can't be counted. One example is *information*. We don't say 'two informations' – we say 'two pieces of information' or 'two items of information'.
- Mike: Nouns like *information, furniture, advice, equipment* and *weather* are uncountable nouns. We can't count them. We can't add 's' and make them plural. We can't use them with words like *many* or *three* or *several*.
- Jeanne: And the reason why it's important to know whether a noun is countable or uncountable is because of a golden rule. **A singular countable noun MUST, MUST, MUST have a determiner in front of it.**
- Mike: So, just to remind ourselves, determiners clarify or give us information about a noun – they tell us things like which one? How many? Whose? And determiners are words like *a, an, the, my, this, three, many*, etc.
- Jeanne: So, I can say 'I need **my** book / I've read **this** book / I bought **three** books / Can I borrow **a** book'. But I can't say 'I need book' or 'Can I borrow book', because *book* is a singular countable noun.
- Mike: Yes. It's a very useful rule: Always use a determiner in front of a singular countable noun. And if you mean 'one example of something', then use **a** or **an**.
- Jeanne: For example: *We used **a** different **system**.*
- Mike: *The company conducted **a** customer **survey**.*
- Jeanne: *I just bought **a** new **computer**.*
- Mike: *My tutor had **an** interesting **idea**.*
- Jeanne: *It is no longer **an** incurable **disease**.*
- Mike: *System, survey, computer, idea* and *disease* are all countable nouns. That's why we need to use **a** and **an** in those examples, because the nouns are singular and we mean 'one example'.
- Jeanne: But just to come back to uncountable nouns for a minute, don't use **a** or **an** before an uncountable noun. Don't say *an information, a news, an equipment*.

- Mike: Right! Use *some*: for example, *some information*, *some news*, *some equipment*. Or use expressions like *a bit of* or *a piece of*: for example, *a bit of information*, *a bit of news*, *a piece of equipment*.
- Jeanne: And if you're not sure if a noun is countable or uncountable, check it in a good dictionary.
- Mike: Yes. And get to know the most common nouns used in YOUR discipline. Are they countable or uncountable?
- Jeanne: So, what are today's most important take aways?
- Mike: Takeaway number one: Use **a** or **an** to talk or write about something as one example of a class of things, for example, *a book*, *a computer*, *an essay*, *a seminar*.
- Jeanne: Takeaway number two: Don't use **a** or **an** before an uncountable noun like *information* or *advice*.
- Mike: And takeaway three: Always use a determiner before a singular countable noun: *a complex system*, *an important experiment*, *this influential study*, *my new supervisor*, and the indefinite article, **a** or **an**, is one of the most frequently used determiners, so don't forget to use it!
- Jeanne: This has been Articles Podcast Number One. Articles Podcast Number Two is all about **the definite article the**.
- Jeanne and Mike: Thanks for listening.