

Accuracy with articles

Countable nouns

Most nouns are countable and have singular and plural forms. We can use *a/an* with countable nouns in the singular, but not in the plural:

a book, two books

an animal, two animals

Uncountable/mass nouns with no plural form

Uncountable nouns have no plural form and are used with a singular verb. They are often referred to as mass nouns because they refer to things we think of as a 'mass' rather than individual items.

Uncountable nouns often refer to substances: *bread, salt, water, metal*, etc. Many uncountable nouns also refer to abstract ideas/concepts, mental states or emotions: *advice, education, happiness, information, knowledge, learning, progress, reluctance, tolerance*, etc.

Use of articles with abstract nouns

When we refer to an abstract concept in general, we don't use an article:

Knowledge is power.

Money can't buy **happiness**.

Time is money.

Some abstract nouns can be preceded by an indefinite article (*a/an*) when referring to a specific situation/example. In these cases, the noun is usually qualified by an adjective, a determiner (*a lot of/a little*) or a defining relative clause:

Knowledge is power. (abstract concept in general)

A (good) knowledge of Maths is important in this job. (specific example)

He was a man of **great learning**. (abstract concept in general)

A little learning is a dangerous thing. (specific example)

We want our children to have the best chance of **happiness**. (abstract concept in general)

I felt **a happiness** that I had never known before. (specific situation)

He agreed to help us, but only with **reluctance**. (abstract concept in general)

I felt **a certain reluctance** to tell my friends what had happened. (specific situation)

However, these nouns are not countable nouns. It is not possible to say, e.g.:

~~each knowledge/two educations/some reluctances~~

We can also use a preceding definite article (*the*) when the meaning of the noun is qualified to refer to a specific type or instance. We do this by means of a defining relative clause or preposition of + noun phrase:

The knowledge that I gained on my field trip was invaluable.

The happiness of millions of people is at stake.

Abstract nouns with plural forms

Many abstract nouns don't have a plural form (e.g. *information, violence, peace, knowledge, justice, progress, anger, courage, chaos*), and some of them can be used in the plural with a slightly different meaning (e.g. *life, hope, trouble, worry, experience, work, evil*):

Is there **life** on the Moon?

We lead busy **lives**.

This treatment offers **hope** to thousands.

They had high **hopes** of success.

I've been having (some) **trouble** (= difficulty) checking my email.

There were a lot of teething **troubles** (= problems) with the system at first.

I was frantic with **worry** (= feeling anxious) about my exams.

Many students have financial **worries** (= problems).

This position requires a lot of **experience** (= knowledge, skills).

It was one of the most enjoyable **experiences** (= specific moments in life) of our holiday.

A lot of people can't find **work** (= a job) these days.

Have you read all the **works** (= pieces of writing) of Shakespeare?

Money is the root of all **evil** (= wickedness, immorality).

Procrastination is one of my **evils** (= sins, bad actions).

1 Complete the text with *the, a/an* or $\emptyset$ (no article).

¹ ? Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that ² ? education is ³ ? fundamental human right and is essential for ⁴ ? exercise of all other human rights. Yet millions of children and adults still lack educational opportunities. In fact, millions of children around the world, primarily in Africa and Asia, are deprived of ⁵ ? access to schools, mainly in consequence of ⁶ ? poverty.

The best way schools can prepare students for the 21st century is to make sure they have ⁷ ? knowledge, skills and ability to achieve their full potential. Students should grow up independent, self-reliant and self-confident to be able to face the challenges of ⁸ ? ever-changing life conditions. ⁹ ? good education should also prepare students to understand and cope with differences of opinion in ¹⁰ ? diverse society. It is also about learning how to be ¹¹ ? good citizen. ¹² ? education system often seems to neglect ¹³ ? development of those qualities and this is partly because of ¹⁴ ? obsession with exam results. Schooling for exams is very different from developing ¹⁵ ? appetite for learning. End-of-course exams on a single day test ¹⁶ ? recall and memory, rather than the range of skills young people need today.