

Restrictors (Articles and Partitives)

The words *the* and *a* and *an* are called articles in grammar. They can be confusing, especially if your first language isn't English. When I tried to write a description of how they fit into English, I discovered that they're hard to categorise if you treat them on their own. However, if you recognise that articles and partitives (words like *some* or *most* that describe part of something) fit into a more general class of restrictors, it's possible to develop a more general classification. That's what I've done here. I'm grateful to Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire (a Massey University linguistics specialist) for convincing me to be a little more systematic about this classification than I was at first. Her advice has strengthened the description considerably; however, any faults that remain are entirely my own responsibility!

Words that restrict nouns: *A car*, *the car*, *some car*, or (just) *car*?

When we write down a noun¹ on its own, without any preceding restrictive word, it functions primarily as the name for a whole class of things, rather than an individual item. *Cow* doesn't mean *Daisy*, *the cow with the crumpled horn*, but the class *cattle beast*, *horned*, *female*, *adult*. So if we want to talk about a property of cows in general, we can write

Cows are second-rate tunnellers.

Of course, we don't always want to make generalisations about a complete class of items; sometimes we want to restrict our discussion to a subset of the class - either a subset that we haven't talked about previously or a subset that we have talked about before. English uses a set of modifier words to restrict nouns so that they refer to various subsets of the class, rather than the class as a whole.

So whenever you write a noun, ask yourself the following questions:

Do I want to write about the properties or behaviour of a whole class?

If not, what prefix word will restrict it to the correct subset of the class?

We'll start with nouns used in their most general sense², that is, as the names for complete classes. Then we'll see how different restrictive modifiers can turn the class

¹ Strictly speaking, I ought to be talking about noun phrases. In the sentence *The car with a red roof drove past*, the subject of the sentence (i.e., the thing that drove past) is the noun phrase *the car with a red roof*, not the simple noun *the car*. That's a noun phrase, but it's easier

name into a name for successively smaller and more closely defined subsets of the class, until it refers only to a single, previously identified, member of a whole class.

We've already seen an example of a noun being used to refer to the behaviour or properties of a whole a class of things. In that situation we use a noun with a plural ending and we don't put any restrictive modifier in front of it. For example, if we want to discuss the behaviour of cars in general, we'd write

Cars should stop at traffic lights when the lights are red.

The word *cars* has a plural ending and it has no restrictive prefix, so we know that the statement applies to all cars. Conversely, although the word *cars* looks like a plural, the lack of a restrictive tells us that it's really a classname, so the statement also applies to all members of the class, including single cars. That is, even a single car must stop when the light is red.

Unidentified sets of class members

The first type of restriction converts a noun from a classname to a name for a set of class members that has not previously been discussed. Some restrictive modifiers restrict a class lightly or not at all

All cars, most cars, many cars, lots of cars...

some restrict a class to a vague extent

Some cars, a number of cars...

some restrict a class a lot

A few cars, few cars, hardly any cars, no cars...

and some restrict a class to a subset of an exact size

One car, three cars, a car...

We use these restrictive modifiers when we're writing about a subset that has not previously been discussed.

The noun we're restricting has a plural or singular ending according to whether we're writing about a subset that contains multiple or single items.

A cow dug a tunnel under the fence singular form

Some cows escaped through the tunnel plural form

Identified sets of class members

The first time a reader reads about an unidentified subset of a class, she or he creates a mental model of that subset. Once the model has been created, the subset is said to have been identified, and when you want to refer to it again, you need to tell the reader that you're referring to the previously identified subset of the class. You do that by prefixing the classname with the definite article (the word *the*). *The* is both singular and

France, the type of footwear used by cowboys without ever having mentioned milk, Prime Ministers, buildings, or cowboys, anywhere else in our document. And if our family owns a cow, we can even write *the damn cow's escaped again*, because we know exactly which cow is meant without having to identify it explicitly (we should never have bought a cow with a crumpled horn; they're always unnaturally talented tunnellers).

On the other hand, if the class and its only member are indistinguishable, we don't need to perform any restriction, so we don't bother with a definite article. Proper names fall into this category. We say *Helmut Kohl was in Berlin on Monday*, but *The German Prime Minister was in Berlin on Monday*. This can give rise to interesting situations:

"Are you Charles Dickens?"

"Yes."

"Can you sign this copy of your book?"

"I didn't write that book."

"But it's by Charles Dickens."

"Not by me."

"Oh, so you're not **the** Charles Dickens."

"Yes, yes I am." For this speaker, his existence and his ego prevent the class of Charles Dickenses from having any other member worth speaking about.

The following sentences should illustrate the various types of restriction that can be placed on a noun:

If we want to write about...	then we might say...
the class in general, with no restrictions	Cars must stop at the traffic lights when the lights are red
a subset of the whole class, not identifiable from previous discussion	Most cars stop at red lights, but some cars just drive straight through. I saw a car crash a red light yesterday.
a subset of the whole class (one item or several items) that is identifiable from previous discussion	The car that hit me had a green roof. or... The cars all had green roofs

Restricting non-countable stuff

The discussion so far has dealt with *things*, things that can be counted. Now we're going to move on to *stuff*; stuff that doesn't have well-defined boundaries, like milk and water. Formally, the names of things are *countable nouns*, and the names of stuff are *non-countable nouns*. I prefer things and stuff. We'll find that the rules for stuff are similar to the rules for things, except that you don't have to worry about singulars and plurals, because stuff doesn't have plurals...

When we refer to the behaviour and properties of the stuff as a class, we don't use a

When we refer to a previously unidentified amount of stuff, we use a restrictive that doesn't imply counting, (*some milk*, or *a little milk*, *a cupful of milk*, *a gallon of milk*), but we may not use a restrictive that implies counting (*three milks*, *many milks*, and never *a milk*³).

When we refer to some stuff that's been referred to previously, we restrict it by using the definite article (*the milk had soured*).

We can add some more sentences to the table we drew up before:

If we want to talk about...	then if it's a class of things, we might say...	and if it's a class of stuff, we might say...
the class in general, with no restrictions	Cars must stop at the traffic lights when the lights are red	Milk comes in udders, bottles, and waxed cardboard boxes
a subset of the whole class, not identifiable from previous discussion	Most cars stop at red lights, but some cars just drive straight through. I saw a car crash a red light yesterday.	Some milk has been spilt on the carpet or... I bought a gallon of milk
a subset of the whole class, identifiable from previous discussion	The car that hit me had a green roof. or... The cars all had green roofs	The milk had turned green

A horrible exception

Much academic progress relies upon detecting fine distinctions between things that people have never previously bothered to distinguish. Sometimes those things are classes of non-countable things. For example, we might have to write a survey of different types of milk (milk from grain-fed cows, milk from potato-fed cows, milk from free-range cows, milk from cows that smoke dope, etc.) In those circumstances, the non-countable material becomes a countable item and we could justifiably write about *a milk*.

It has been shown that 58% of respondents prefer a milk with a calcium content exceeding x%.

Or even

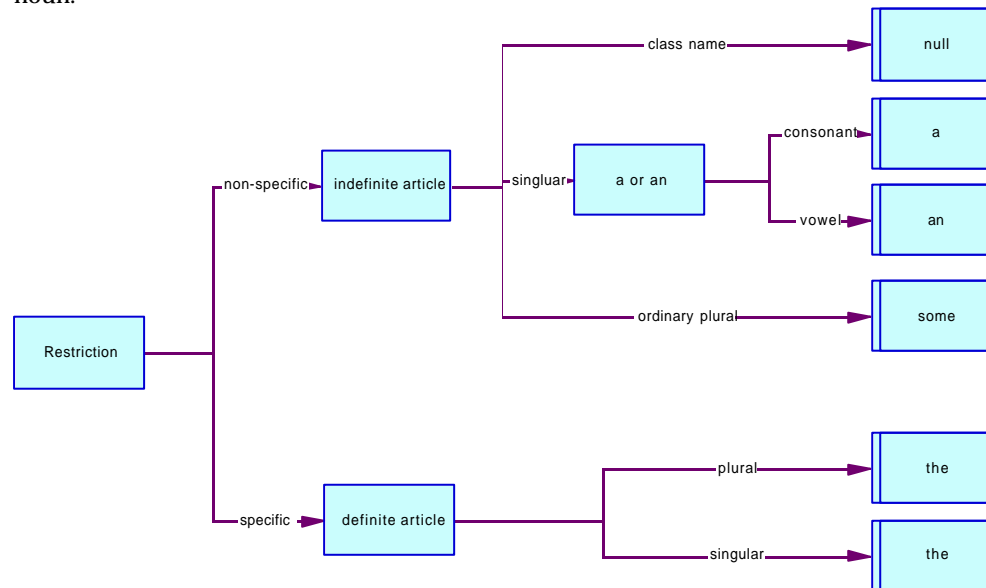
In a recent survey, European subjects preferred the milks from grain-fed cows and potato-fed cows by a margin of 7%, with a standard deviation of 2.3%.⁴

Adjectives

Where do adjectives fit into this scheme? They don't.

Adjectives may seem to define a subset of a class, like restrictives, but they're in a different (you guessed it) class. We seem to treat *yellow cows* as a new class (and possibly as a biological aberration), rather than as a restriction on the class of cows. It seems a subtle distinction, but it explains why we can write *some yellow cows* or *the yellow cows*, but we could never write *yellow some cows* or *yellow the cows*. All clear now?

Here's a diagram that might help you to choose which, if any, restrictors to put before a noun.



Although the diagram looks daunting, it's not really very complex. You'll probably find that you understand at least three quarters of it without difficulty. But if English is not your first language, you may need to spend a little time revising the distinction between conventional plurals (where we're talking about a group of specific items) and class names (where we're talking about the properties and behaviour possessed by a whole class of items). These are the top and bottom items at the right hand edge of the diagram.