



ARTICLES AND DETERMINERS

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2.1 What are articles and determiners?

As you saw in *Chapter 1*, all French nouns, except for proper names, are preceded by a short introductory word. These words are called *determiners*, or, in certain cases, they are also called *articles*. Articles are actually a subset of the category of words called determiners, which contains other expressions, such as possessives, demonstratives, and quantifiers—discussed below. The articles in the sentences below are boldfaced.

J'aime **les** chiens.

I like dogs.

J'ai vu **un** serpent.

I saw a snake.

Il a bu **du** vin.

He drank (some) wine.

In French textbooks, you will find the terms “definite,” “indefinite,” and “partitive” articles. The forms of these three types of articles, along with their translations, appear in the chart on the following page. A discussion of their use follows.

FORMS

Definite Articles (<i>the</i> , ø ¹)		
le communisme	<i>the communism</i> or <i>communism</i>	masculine noun
la haine	<i>the hatred</i> or <i>hatred</i>	feminine noun
l' amour	<i>the love</i> or <i>love</i>	noun beginning with a vowel sound
les chiens	<i>the dogs</i> or <i>dogs</i>	plural noun
Indefinite Articles (<i>a</i> , <i>some</i> , ø)		
un chien	<i>a dog</i>	masculine noun
une table	<i>a table</i>	feminine noun
des olives	<i>some olives</i> or <i>olives</i>	plural noun
Partitive Articles (<i>some</i> , <i>any</i> , ø)		
du vin	<i>some wine</i> , <i>any wine</i> , <i>wine</i>	masculine noun
de la bière	<i>some beer</i> , <i>any beer</i> , <i>beer</i>	feminine noun
de l' eau	<i>some water</i> , <i>any water</i> , <i>water</i>	noun beginning with a vowel sound

¹Note that ø means “no article in English.”

Many textbooks include **des** in the partitive articles list, but some linguists argue that it is better considered an indefinite article. This handbook will go along with that decision.

2.2 Can I just translate from English into French to decide which article to use?

Unfortunately, you can't. You will get yourself into big trouble. The English and French article systems may seem comparable, but there are as many differences as there are similarities. Sometimes translating works just fine, as in the following examples.

J'ai vu le chien.	<i>I saw the dog.</i>	(<i>the</i> = definite article)
J'ai vu un chien.	<i>I saw a dog.</i>	(<i>a</i> = indefinite article)
J'ai bu du vin.	<i>I drank some wine.</i>	(<i>some</i> = partitive article)

Other times, however, the translations don't correspond particularly well. **J'aime les chiens**, for example, can be translated as either “I like dogs” or “I like the dogs.” **Il a bu du vin** can be translated as “He drank wine” or “He drank some wine.” “Dogs are animals” is translated as **Les chiens sont des animaux**. We use the definite article **les** to mean *all* dogs and the indefinite article **des** to mean *some* (not all) animals. So we

can't just say that when there is no article in English we should use the definite (or indefinite) article in French, since both are possible in certain situations. Therefore, it is impossible to choose the correct articles to precede French nouns without considering the context of the nouns that they modify.

2.3 When do I use a definite article?

Definite articles (**le, la, l', les**) are used in the following two cases:

- to designate all members of a group (what we call *generic* nouns).
- when the noun in question has already been mentioned or can be assumed already to be part of the discussion at hand.

2.4 Generic Nouns

When you are referring to all the members of a particular group, or what linguists call a *generic* noun, use the definite article in French:

J'aime **les** chiens.

I like dogs.

Les Américains adorent le baseball.

Americans love baseball.

NOTE: In English, no article is used when one is referring to all the members of the group.

2.5 Previously Mentioned Nouns or Assumed as Part of the Discussion

When a noun has already been mentioned, is physically present, or can be assumed to be part of the discussion at hand, use the definite article in French. Here are three examples.

Ma tante a deux enfants: un garçon et une fille. **Le** garçon est pénible, mais j'aime bien **la** fille.

*My aunt has two children: a boy and a girl. **The** boy is annoying, but I like **the** girl a lot.*

(The boy and the girl were previously mentioned.)



(Looking at the pastries)
Miam ! Je veux **le** pain au
chocolat.

Yum! I want **the** pain au
chocolat.

(The pain au chocolat is physically present—note that there can be only one pain au chocolat available here; otherwise it would not be identifiable among the others.)



(Waiting for the bus)

Mais où est **le** bus?

But where is **the** bus?

(The bus is assumed as part of the discussion at hand, since people waiting at a bus stop are waiting for a particular bus to come along.)



NOTE: In English, these definite articles translate as "the."

2.6 When do I use an indefinite article?

Indefinite articles (**un, une, des**) are used before nouns that have not been mentioned yet and that are new to the conversation.

Dans mon sac, j'ai **un** crayon et
un cahier.

*In my bag, I have **a** pencil and
a notebook.*

J'ai vu **des** chiens hier au parc.

*I saw **some** dogs yesterday at the
park.*