



09. The importance of 'some' or 'any' in French

'Partitive articles' (du, de la, des) are an important part of the French language to express an uncountable quantity.

Which form to use

Let's start with exactly what the partitive articles look like. In a similar way to definite articles, they change in accordance with the number and gender of the noun.

| | masculine | feminine |
|----------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| singular | <i>du or de l'</i> | <i>de la or de l'</i> |
| plural | <i>des</i> | <i>des</i> |



Listen to the partitive articles.



- Note the contraction to *de l'* in front of a vowel or '*h muet*' for both masculine and feminine. Examples:

1. masculine – *de l'œuf*

2. feminine – *de l'herbe*

Using the partitive article: French vs English

1. Some

In French the partitive article is used to express quantities which cannot be specifically counted. In English, it may be translated as 'some' or 'any', or, in other cases, you find that no article is used at all.

For this reason, it is not always obvious to French learners exactly how and when to use the partitive article. Let's think about a discussion about a meal we had where we ate pasta (*les pâtes*) and bread (*le pain*).

"We ate pasta and bread"

No articles have been used in the above sentence i.e. there are no words placed directly before the nouns pasta and bread to express any more information about them. However, what we are really saying is:

“We ate **some** pasta and **some** bread”

Now that we are more aware of exactly what we are trying to express, let’s tackle the sentence in French bearing in mind that we cannot leave the articles out as we did in English.

*Nous avons mangé **des** pâtes et **du** pain.*

Another way to think about it may be to say that we cannot express “how many” pasta or “how many” bread. We need to use “some”.

2. Abstract nouns

Our above example deals with food which is a simpler concept i.e. *some* bread.

I want to draw your attention to abstract nouns such as ‘patience’ and ‘luck’ where a partitive article is also required. Examples:

Heureusement, j’ai de la patience Fortunately, I am patient

Tu as de la chance! You are lucky!

When the partitive article becomes ‘de’

1. Negation

Earlier I mentioned that the French partitive article is sometimes translated as ‘any’. This is the case when it follows a negative statement. Here, the partitive article becomes ‘de’ (or *de l’* before a vowel or ‘h muet’ – see separate *Grammar Boost* for a discussion on this). Example:

- *Je veux **du** café* I want **some** coffee
- *Je ne veux pas **de** lait* I do not want **any** milk



Listen to the two sentences above

2. Quantity

Use ‘de’ when using expressions of measurable quantities such as:

- *un kilo de* a kilo of
- *une tasse de* a cup of

But also expressions of general quantity. Examples:

- *beaucoup de*: J’ai bu du lait vs j’ai bu beaucoup de lait (I drank milk vs I drank lots of milk)
- *peu de*: J’ai de l’argent vs j’ai peu d’argent (I have money vs I have little money)
- *trop de*: J’ai des chaussettes vs j’ai trop de chaussettes (I have socks vs I have too many socks)

Definite Article vs The Partitive Article (i.e. *Le* vs *Du*)

To help with your decision, think to yourself:

Am I talking about something as a whole and in general or am I talking about a part of it?

Simpler with concrete nouns such as bread or milk. Examples:



1. Milk is a good source of calcium. Am I talking about all milk in general or some milk? All milk, so I'll use a definite article. *Le lait est une bonne source de calcium*
2. The boy drank milk. Am I talking about all milk in general or some milk? Some milk, so I'll use a partitive article. Le garçon a bu **du** lait.

With abstract nouns, this technique still works but just needs more careful consideration. Examples:

1. Courage is an admirable quality. Am I talking about courage in general or some courage? In general – so I'll use a definite article. *Le courage est une qualité admirable.*
2. The lion has courage. Am I talking about courage in general or some courage? Some – so I'll use a partitive article. *Le lion a **du** courage.*

Next time you are watching a Mini Life video have a think about why certain articles have been chosen. You should have a better handle on it now!