

## BREAD NOVICE

## خَلِينَا نَتَعَلَّمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ!

One distinctive feature of Arabic is how it treats groups of related things that can't be (or don't need to be counted individually). Unlike many European languages, Arabic nouns doesn't just distinguish just two ways of counting things, but rather three. We call these possible forms "collective," "singulative," and "plural."

It is helpful to begin by thinking of English. In English, so-called mass nouns, like the word "**bread**," behave somewhat like singular nouns, as in "bread is delicious," where we use the verb "is" instead of the verb "are." When we want to give a degree of quantification to a mass noun, we usually have to introduce an additional word: "**a piece of bread**" or "**three pieces of bread**." Similar, if we want to talk about more than one instance of "bread," we usually refer to different "**types of bread**," though it is possible for "breads" (plural) to carry the same meaning given sufficient context. Either way, English only has two possible forms for the noun: either "bread" or "breads." We can think of this as a two-way distinction.

Arabic does things a bit differently. Like English, it allows for mass nouns that can't be counted, as in الخُبْزُ "bread." These mass nouns also behave somewhat like singular

nouns: for example, we can say that الخُبْزُ is لذيذ in the same way that we can say a رجل "man" is طويل "tall." But what about when we want to count difference **pieces** of bread?

For turning mass nouns into countable ones, Arabic doesn't use an extra word alongside خُبْز. Instead, it changes the word خُبْز itself by adding a taa' marbuuTa (ة) to the end of the word, instead giving us خُبْزَة "a single piece of bread." If we want to count more than one piece of bread, we might refer to ثلاث خُبْزَات "three pieces of bread," and so on, simply using the ات ending to make خُبْزَة into a plural.

Classical Arabic treats the idea of different "types of bread" similarly, again changing the actual form of the noun rather than adding an extra word. In these cases, we use a broken plural form in which the internal vowels of the word are rearranged. In the case of خُبْز, this gives us أَخْبَاز "types of bread."

The chart below gives a number of words for which the three-way distinction exists in Classical Arabic. Using your new grammatical knowledge, fill out the blank spaces in the chart with likely meanings:

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Plural		Collective		Singular	
أخباز	types of bread	خُبْز	bread	خُبْزَة	a piece of bread
أسماك		سَمَك	fish	سَمَكَة	
أشجار		شَجَر		شَجَرَة	a tree
أعشاب		عُشْب	vegetation	عُشْبَة	
وُرد	types of flowers	وَرْد		وَرْدَة	
أوراق		وَرَق		وَرَقَة	a leaf

Finally, it is worth noting that modern Arabic dialects do not maintain this system perfectly for all words. Instead, we will sometimes find that only two of these forms are used: for example, Moroccan has خبز and خبزة, but does not use أخباز. Like other dialects and even Standard Arabic, when Arabic speakers in Morocco refer to different “types of bread,” they will often just speak of أنواع الخبز, or very literally “types of bread,” as in English.

With this in mind, it is still worth being aware of the classical system, because all three forms are in common use when you take multiple vocabulary items into account.