articles

The use and non-use of articles is a challenging aspect of English grammar for many English language learners. This handout will help you identify when to use an article and which one to use.

General Information

This section will briefly introduce the different articles in English. The subsequent sections will give more detailed explanations about their specific uses.

Definition and Function

Articles (also called determinatives by some grammarians) are words that indicate the definiteness of a noun or noun phrase.

The Definite Article: "The"

"The" is the definite article in English.

Indefinite Articles: "A," "An," and "Some"

"A" and "an" are the primary indefinite articles in English. Occasionally "some" is used with plurals.

"A" is used before words that begin with a consonant sound.

> **Examples**:   a president   a city   a truck

"An" is used before words that begin with a vowel sound.

> **Examples**:   an egg   an interview   an octagon

Remember that what makes the difference is the initial *sound*, not the initial letter. There are cases where a word that begins with a vowel actually has an initial consonant sound and vice versa.

> **Examples**:   an hour   a university

When using an indefinite article in combination with an adjective to modify a noun, match the article to the initial sound of the adjective.

> **Examples**:   a scrambled egg   an old cat

The Zero Article: ø

Sometimes no article is needed. These cases are represented in this handout with the zero article (ø).

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Example: (ø) Cheetahs are my favorite animals.

Example: I enjoy studying (ø) history.

Critical Distinctions

To correctly use articles, you must be able to make four distinctions about nouns:

- Is the noun common or proper?

- Is the noun definite or indefinite?

- Is the noun count or non-count?

- If the noun is a count noun, is it singular or plural?

Common vs. Proper Nouns

Common nouns refer to general and non-specific persons, places, or things.

Examples: president   city   university

Proper nouns refer to specific and unique persons, places, or things.

Examples: Barack Obama   Baltimore   University of Maryland

Definite vs. Indefinite Nouns

Definiteness is a feature of nouns that indicates whether a particular noun is **specific or general** in a given context.

If a noun refers to a specific person, place, or thing, it is **definite.** In other words, definite nouns are unique and easily identifiable by the audience.

Example: Can you hand me the paper on my desk?

Note: "Paper" in this context is definite: the speaker has a specific paper in mind and expects the audience to understand.

If a noun refers to a general or nonspecific person, place, or thing, it is **indefinite.** Unlike definite nouns, indefinite nouns are unidentifiable to the audience, usually because they are being introduced for the first time.

Example: A squirrel chewed a hole in my tent.

Note: "Squirrel" in this context is indefinite: the speaker doesn't have a specific squirrel in mind—he or she just knows that a squirrel chewed the hole.

Example: Horses eat hay.

Note: "Horses" in this context is indefinite: the speaker is making a general statement about all horses.

Count vs. Non-count Nouns

Count nouns can be counted and expressed in the plural.

Examples: two oranges   three chairs   five countries

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Non-count nouns, also known as mass nouns, cannot be quantified and lack a plural form. Most non-count nouns are gases, liquids, abstractions, particles, foods, or sets of times.

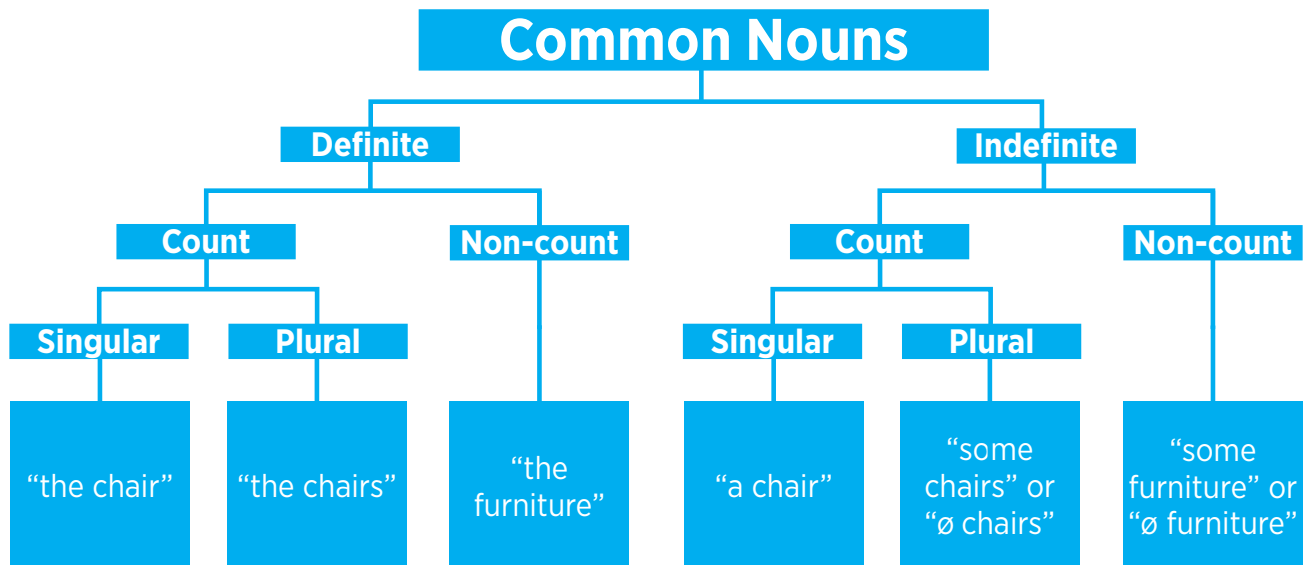> **Examples:**   salt   gold   pollution

Singular vs. Plural Nouns

If a noun is a count noun, it will either be singular or plural. This is the easiest distinction of the four to make.

> *Note:* For more information on nouns, please see our handout on this topic.

Articles with Common Nouns

Once you have determined that a noun is common, you will need to work your way through the remaining distinctions. This chart can help you make sense of the categories discussed in the following sections.

Common Nouns

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                         Common Nouns
           ┌───────────────────┴───────────────────┐
        Definite                                Indefinite
     ┌──────┴──────┐                       ┌────────┴────────┐
   Count      Non-count                  Count          Non-count
  ┌──┴──┐         │                     ┌──┴──┐              │
Singular Plural   │                  Singular Plural         │
  │       │       │                     │       │           │
"the    "the    "the                  "a       "some       "some
chair"  chairs" furniture"            chair"   chairs" or  furniture" or
                                               "ø chairs"  "ø furniture"
```

Definite Common Nouns

With common nouns that are definite and specific, you simply use "the," the definite article. This is true of non-count nouns and of count nouns both in the singular and in the plural.

> **Example**: The dog chased the cats.

> *Note:* "The dog" refers to a singular, specific dog. "The cats" refers to a group of specific cats.

Indefinite Common Nouns

With common nouns that are indefinite, unspecific, and general, you must first determine if the noun is a count or non-count noun.

Non-count Noun: If an indefinite noun is a non-count noun, you can either use the zero article (i.e., omit the article entirely) or use "some."

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Example: I put (ø) salt on the food. I put some salt on the food.

Note: "Salt" and "some salt" mean essentially the same thing: they refer to a nonspecified amount of salt.

Count Noun: If an indefinite noun is a count noun, you then have to determine if it is singular or plural. If it is **singula**r, you will use "a" or "an." "A/an" in this case means "one."

Example: I want to eat an orange.

Note: "An orange" refers to an orange in general, not a specific orange.

If it is **plural**, you will use either "some" or the zero article to indicate a non-specific quantity.

Example: I want to eat some oranges. I want to eat (ø) oranges.

Note: "Some oranges" and "oranges" mean essentially the same thing: they refer to oranges in general, not to specific oranges.

Articles with Proper Nouns

Using articles with proper nouns is slightly more complicated than using them with common nouns because there are fewer concrete rules.

Personal Names

Use the zero article with personal names unless you need to distinguish between two people with the same name, in which case you would use "the."

Examples: Isaac Newton   Albert Einstein   Neil DeGrasse Tyson

Example: Is this the Molly Turner I met last week?

"The" can also be used for emphasis, especially when the person is famous.

Example: You mean to tell me that you met *the* Julia Roberts, the famous movie actress?

Use "a/an" when classifying by a person's name or when you don't know the person.

Examples: I went to elementary school with a Molly Turner.

Example: Sir, there's a Molly Turner here to see you.

Oceans, Rivers, Channels, Gulfs, and Seas

Use "the" for oceans, rivers, channels, gulfs, and seas.

Examples: the Pacific   the Nile   the Mediterranean

Bays and Waterfalls

Generally, use the zero article for the names of bays or waterfalls.

Examples: Bodega Bay   Niagara Falls   Angel Falls

However, if the name contains the preposition "of," use "the."

Examples: the Bay of Bengal   the Bay of Fundy   the Falls of the Ohio

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Continents, Countries, States, and Cities

Generally, use the zero article with the names of continents, countries, states, and cities.

Examples: Asia   France   New York City

However, if the name is plural or contains either the preposition "of" and/or an adjective, use "the."

Examples: the Philippines   the United States   the Democratic Republic of Congo

Note: "Great Britain" is an exception.

Lakes, Mountains, and Islands

Use "the" for ranges of mountains, chains of islands, and groups of lakes.

Examples: the Alps   the Azores   the Finger Lakes

Use the zero article before the names of specific mountains, islands, or lakes.

Examples: Mount Everest   Maui   Lake Michigan

Note: There are rare exceptions to this rule, like the Matterhorn.

Landmarks

Use "the" with the name of geographical landmarks.

Examples: the Grand Canyon   the Great Rift   the Devil's Tower

Buildings

Use "the" with the names of most buildings.

Examples: the Pentagon   the Coliseum   the White House

Streets, Roads, Squares, & Parks

Use the zero article with the names of streets, roads, squares, or parks.

Examples: Lombard St   Trafalgar Square   Patterson Park

Corporations

Use the zero article when referring to corporations—except when using "corporation" as a part of the title. In this case, use "the."

Examples: Target

Examples: the Target Corporation

Holidays, Months, & Days

Use the zero article when referring generally to holidays, months, and days.

Example: What did you get me for (ø) Christmas?

Use "the" to refer to a particular or specific instance of the holiday, month, or day.

Example: Where did you go the June before last?

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However, when using "last" or "next" immediately before the name of a holiday, month, or day, use the zero article.

> **Example**: I went to the doctor (ø) last Monday.

Newspapers

Use "the" with the names of newspapers.

> **Examples**:   the *Baltimore Sun*   the *Wall Street Journal*   the *Examiner*

Languages

Use the zero article when referring to languages—except when using "language" as a part of the name. In this case, use "the."

> **Examples**:   English

> **Examples**:   the English language

Articles in Common Contexts

Certain contexts call for special use of articles. The following are guidelines for some of the most common circumstances.

Generalizations and Classifications

There are several different ways to make generalizations or general statements of classification.

The first is to use the zero article when discussing a group of things or people.

> **Example**: (ø) Babies are not (ø) pets.

The second is to use the zero article when making statements about non-count nouns.

> **Example**: I enjoy studying (ø) history.

However, "a/an" should be used when making generalizations in the singular.

> **Example**: A baby is not a pet.

Lastly, use "the" when making generalizations about types of animals, instruments, and inventions.

> **Example**: The platypus is a mammal.

> **Example**: Alexander Graham Bell is credited with inventing the telephone.

> **Example**: Can you play the piano?

Jobs

As with other classifications, use "a/an" to classify one person's job.

> **Example**: He wants to be a doctor when he grows up.

Use the zero article to classify the jobs of a group.

> **Example**: All the people at the conference were (ø) doctors.

However, when giving a specific job title or stating a unique position, use "the."

> **Example**: He is the communications coordinator for the Community Development Corporation.

Meals

Use the zero article with "breakfast," "lunch," and "dinner."

> **Example**: I ate the blueberry pancakes for (ø) breakfast.

One exception is when you modify one of these words with an adjective. In this case, use an indefinite article.

> **Example**: No, thanks. I'm full. I just ate **an enormous lunch**.

> Another exception is if you are referring to a specific event, in which case you would use "the."

> **Example**: How was the dinner honoring Dr. Thom last night?

Common and Conceptual Places

Generally, common and generic place words like "town," "river," and "lake" follow the rules of other common nouns. The use of article will depend on if it is definite or indefinite, count or non-count, and singular or plural.

> **Example**: There is a river that runs through the town near my grandmother's house.

> **Example**: (ø) Lakes can be great spots to sun bathe.

However, you should always use "the" when referring to these places abstractly or conceptually like "the city," "the sky," "the sea," "the ground," etc.

> **Example**: This plane flies through **the sky** at 600 mph.

> *Note:* In this example, "the sky" is used as a general concept.

Still, nouns like "school" and "prison" have opposite rules for physical vs. conceptual space. For these words, use the zero article when referring to the conceptual space and "the" when referring to the physical space.

> **Conceptual**: She went to (ø) school.

> **Physical**: She went to the school.

> *Note:* In the first example, "she" went to "school," the general institution where all children go. However, in the second example, "she" went to the specific, physical school building she attends.

Space

Use the zero article with the word "space."

> **Example**: The asteroid sailed through (ø) space.

Use "the" with "the sun" and "the moon."

> **Example**: The sun is a star.

"Same"

Use "the" when using the word "same."

> **Example**: That's the same Ravens hat my brother has!

Superlatives

Use "the" with superlatives.

> **Example**: Your dad's proposal was the happiest moment of my life.

Fused-Heads or Substantive Adjectives

Use "the" with fused-head constructions or substantive adjectives.

> **Example**: The homeless aren't safe outside when it's this cold.

> **Example**: We should tax the wealthy.

The Unknown

Use "some" with singular count nouns to indicate the identity of something is vague, unknown or unimportant.

> **Example:** Some student dropped this paper off for you.

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