

Grammar Reference

The definite article with abstract uncountable nouns

Meaning and use

The definite article is the word **the**.

An **uncountable noun**, sometimes called a **mass noun** is a noun that usually does not have a plural form. It refers to something that cannot be counted numerically. Which means the amount of it cannot usually be specified with just a number.

Some examples of this kind of noun are:

bread, water, milk, air, snow, accommodation, furniture

Abstract uncountable nouns do not refer to things that we can sense, things that we can taste, touch, smell, hear or see. They refer to ideas, feelings, emotions qualities and concepts. Some examples of this kind of noun are:

love, fun, happiness, kindness, patience, truth, hope, childhood

Take note: general and specific statements and the definite article

When we use an **abstract uncountable noun** to make a **general statement**, we don't use **the**.

When we use an **abstract uncountable noun** to refer to a specific example of a noun, we use **the** before the noun.

Compare these examples:

*Money can't buy you **happiness**.*

This is a general statement about happiness; that it can't be bought.

*I can't express **the happiness** (that) I felt when my son was born.*

This statement refers to a particular time of happiness. The defining relative clause **(that) I felt when my son was born** identifies which time of happiness.

***Enthusiasm** is important in any line of work.*

This is a general statement about the importance of **enthusiasm**.

***The enthusiasm** she has for her craft is obvious.*

This statement refers to enthusiasm for a specific activity. The phrase **she has for her craft** identifies the particular activity.

*A quality I look for in a partner is **intelligence**.*

This statement refers to intelligence in general, as an appealing quality.

*She's got **the intelligence** to get to the very top of her profession.*

This statement refers to a particular level of intelligence needed for a specific achievement. The phrase **to get to the very top of her profession** defines which achievement.

*Everyone is entitled to **freedom**.*

This is a general statement about the idea of freedom.

*Just because you're 15 now doesn't mean you have **the freedom** to come and go as you please.*

This sentence focuses on a specific **freedom**. The phrase **to come and go as you please** defines the freedom, which in this case is not granted!

