

Articles

(a/an, the)

Many nouns must be preceded by a word called an “article” when used in a sentence. The main articles in English are “a/an” and “the.” Articles often cause problems for English language learners because the rules for using them are complex and can depend on context. Fortunately, article errors do not generally cause a writer or speaker to be misunderstood. It takes time to become an expert user of articles, but learning a few rules will make this process easier. Paying attention to how native English speakers use articles will also help English language learners understand the contexts in which particular articles are used.

Types of Nouns

To understand articles, it is important to first learn about the ways nouns are used in sentences. When deciding which article to use, first identify the type of noun that it will precede.

*****Please note that a noun may belong to more than one of the following categories.*****

Count nouns

Some nouns describe things that can be enumerated individually. These types of nouns are called “count nouns.”

Examples of count nouns:

Phone, computer, desk, pen, pencil, coffee cup, highlighter, tape, stapler, thumbtack, paperclip, cafeteria, basketball court, accomplishment, goal, problem, professor, etc.

Count nouns used in sentences:

The school has a cafeteria and a basketball court.

Please bring the pencils to my desk.

Noncount nouns

Some nouns describe things that cannot be enumerated individually. These nouns are called noncount nouns. Noncount nouns include physical things that are described as a mass (e.g., “water”) or as a category of items (e.g., “furniture”), and abstract concepts that cannot be enumerated (e.g., “happiness”).

Examples of noncount nouns:

Water, oil, gravel, sand, smoke, hair, food, grass, foliage, furniture, luggage, jewelry, courage, determination, anger, confidence, etc.

Noncount nouns used in sentences:

The house is filled with antique furniture.

I enjoy making jewelry.

She has great confidence in her abilities.

To quantify a noncount noun, it is necessary to place a count noun or determiner before it:

He poured a glass of water.

My grandmother left me a box of jewelry.

Please bring me some sand from the beach.

Indefinite nouns

When a singular noun is referred to in a non-specific way, or as a member of a class or category, it is called an indefinite noun.

He is going to buy us a treat at the store.

I would like to take a vacation, but I don't have enough money right now.

Definite nouns

When a noun is used to describe a specific, unique object, it is called a definite noun. Often the choice to use "a" or "the" to indicate if a noun is indefinite or definite will depend on what knowledge is shared by the speakers in an exchange.

The book that I took to class was the wrong one.

Take the assignment to Linda when you visit her this afternoon. (a specific assignment)

Generic nouns

Speakers use generic nouns to make generalized statements. A generic noun represents an entire class of things. Rather than referring to a real, specific item, a generic noun acts as a symbol of a whole group.

Education is important.

The computer is the greatest invention in history.

The twenty-first century college student is focused on career preparation.

Articles

This section describes when to use the articles “a/an” or “the” before a noun as well as when to omit the article entirely.

A/An

- Use “a/an” to refer to singular indefinite nouns.

Please bring me a pen. (any pen)

I want to get an education. (in a general sense)

- “A” is used before nouns that begin with consonant sounds:

My aunt bought me a computer for college.

- “An” is used before nouns that begin with vowel sounds:

She always packs an apple in her lunch.

The

- Use “the” to refer to singular and plural definite nouns.

Examples of “the” used before definite nouns:

Most American high school students will take the SAT Test in preparation for college.

My professor said I could rewrite the discussion board posts I submitted last week.

- Use “the” before the names of rivers, oceans and seas: the Mississippi, the Atlantic
- Use “the” before points on the globe: the Equator, the North Pole
- Use “the” before geographical areas: the Middle East, the West
- Use “the” before the names of deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: the Mojave Desert, the Gulf of Mexico, the Muir Woods, the Iberian Peninsula
- Use “the” before certain types of singular generic count nouns. The “generic the” is commonly used with species of animals, inventions, and musical instruments.

Examples of the “generic the”:

The King Cobra is the world’s longest venomous snake.

Who invented the airplane?

My sister plays the clarinet.

No Article

- Most of the time, generic nouns are not preceded by an article.

Bananas are yellow.

Fruit is good for you.

- Omit the article from the names of most countries/territories: *Belize, Mexico, Bolivia* (except with certain countries such as the Philippines, the United States)
- Omit the article from the names of cities, towns, or states: *Seoul, Manitoba, Miami*
- Omit the article from the names of streets: *Washington Blvd., Main St.*
- Omit the article from the names of lakes and bays: *Lake Texoma, Lake Lewisville* (except with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes)
- Omit the article from the names of mountains: *Mount Denali, Mount Fuji* (except with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Rockies or unusual names like the Matterhorn)
- Omit the article from the names of continents: *Africa, Australia*
- Omit the article from the names of islands: *Prince Edward Island, Maui, Key West* (except with island chains like the Hawaiian Islands)