ARTICLES
adapted from Writing with Confidence by Alan Meyer, Harper Collins, 1995

A Summary of usage:

There are two kinds of nouns in English:

1. countable nouns (you can put a number before them): one day, three apples, five people.
2. uncountable nouns (you cannot put a number before them): water, music, honesty, luggage.

When you are deciding whether to use a/an or the with singular, countable nouns:

1. use a/an when you mean any one or one of many (for example: a tree = any tree; a hair = one hair);
2. use a/an for identification (for example: “Tom is a barber.”);
3. use the to point out a specific or particular one (for example: the chair in the corner, or the pen with the missing cap);
4. use the when you mean the only one (for example: the floor, the second floor, the attic).
5. use the to refer to nouns you have already mentioned (for example: “I found a photograph and a painting in the attic. The painting [now specified] apparently was based on the photograph.”).

When you are deciding whether or not to use the in front of plural, uncountable, or capitalized nouns:

1. Before specific plurals, place the (for example: the last three days, the lectures Professor Chin gave);
2. Before plurals used in a general sense, place no article (for example: many students, rock bands, prices).
3. With uncountable nouns used in a general sense, use no article (for example: religion, exercise, air).
4. With capitalized nouns, use the for:
   i. country names that end in –s (the United States)
   ii. country names that contain Republic (the Republic of South Africa)
   iii. school names beginning with College or University (the University of Iowa)
   iv. river, ocean, or sea names (the Atlantic Ocean)

   Note: Do not place the before lake names (Lake Erie)
A more detailed explanation of *a/an* and *the* usage:

**A/An**

- **The article *a/an* means the same thing as the number one.** Therefore, you can use *a/an* only before a *singular countable noun*. *A/an* means “any one” or “one of many.”

  Here are some examples of the use of *a/an*:

  Take *a* pencil ( *any one* pencil; there are many choices).
  I just ate *an* apple ( *one of many* possible apples).
  A robin built its nest in *that* tree ( *not* a specific robin; it could be *any on* robin).

- **Use *a/an* for Identification.** In many languages, you could write “I am student” without the *a*. In English, you must include the *a*, since you mean, “I am *one of many* students.”

  Here are some more sentences in which *a/an* identifies someone or something:

  He is *a* lawyer.
  It is *an* adjective.
  She is only *a* municipal worker.
  That was *a* funny story.

- **Use *a* Before Consonant Sounds, *an* Before Vowel Sounds.** The beginning sound—not the spelling—of a word determines whether you should use *a* or *an* before it.

  *A* goes before *consonant sounds*:

  *a* lesson    *a* shoe
  *a* chair    *a* doctor

  *an* goes before *vowel sounds* (for example, *an* apple is easier to pronounce than *a* apple):

  *an* elephant    *an* awful experience
  *an* enormous task    *an* overcharge

**THE**

- **Use *the* to Point to a Specific One.** Unlike *a*, which means “any one,” *the* points out a *specific* one or a *particular* one.

  Here are some examples of the use of *the*:

  What is *the* assignment for *Wednesday*? (Specifies it and distinguishes it from other assignments, like those for Monday and Friday.)
The new Chevrolet that Linda bought is beautiful. (Specifies it and distinguishes it from other cars or Chevrolets.)
Let’s eat the apple pie. (Specifies it and distinguishes it from other pies, like peach or cherry pies.)
The man standing over there asked to speak to the manager. (Specifies man and distinguishes him from others who may be present.)

- **Use the When You Mean the Only One.** Sometimes there is only one of something in a room, or in a house, or in the whole world. When you refer to that thing, you cannot use the article *a*, for *a* implies that something comes from a group containing more than one. Instead, you must use the article *the*.

  The roof of this house leaks. (The house has only one roof.)
  I want to buy carpeting for the floor. (There is only one floor.)
  What time does the clock say? (There is only one clock in the room.)
  The sky is cloudy today. (There is only one sky.)

- **Use the to Refer to Nouns You Have Already Mentioned.** Once you have mentioned a noun, you have specified which one you mean. When you mention it a second time, you should use *the* before it instead of *a*.

  Would you buy a used car from that man?
  Yes, but only if the car (now specified) had a five-year guarantee.
  You will find a pair of earrings and a necklace in my drawer. The Necklace (now specified) was my grandmother’s.

### When to use No Article

- **Use the Before Specific Plural Countable and Specific Uncountable Nouns; Use No Article Before General Plural Countable and General Uncountable Nouns.** As you know, you cannot place *a/an* before a plural noun. Therefore, when you use a plural noun, your choice is limited to *the* or no article at all. *The* makes the plural noun specific; no article makes the plural noun nonspecific, or general, in its meaning. Compare the following sets of sentences:

  The three birds on the windowsill (specific) are pigeons.
  vs.
  Birds (in general) are interesting animals.

  The people on my block (specific) are friendly.
  vs.
  People (in general) are attending college in larger numbers.

  The examinations this semester (specific) have been easier than the examinations last semester.
Examinations (in general) don’t usually make me nervous.

- If you use an uncountable noun in a general sense, you also do not use an article. Compare these examples.

  The water in Lake Erie (specific) is polluted.
  but
  Water (in general) is plentiful.

  The fruit this season (specific) has been expensive.
  but
  Fruit (general) is good for you.

Some Additional Advice About A/An and The

- Some Names Require the.
  Use the before the names of the countries that end in –s or contain the word Republic.

  the United States (but just America)
  the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (but just Russia)
  the Netherlands (but just Holland)
  the British Isles (but just Great Britain)
  the People’s Republic of China (but just China)
  Note this exception: the Soviet Union

  Use the before the names of rivers, oceans, and seas (but not lakes).

  the Nile River
  the Mediterranean Sea
  the Atlantic Ocean
  Lake Superior
  Exception: the Great Salt Lake

  Use the before the names of colleges and universities beginning with the words College or University.

  the University of Illinois
  the University of Southern California
  the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
  Indiana University
  Boston College
### BASIC ARTICLE USAGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR COUNT NOUN</th>
<th>(a) A <strong>banana</strong> is yellow.*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL COUNT NOUN</td>
<td>(b) 0 <strong>Bananas</strong> are yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NONCOUNT NOUN</td>
<td>(c) 0 Fruit is good for you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A speaker uses generic nouns to make generalizations. A generic noun represents a whole class of things, it is not specific, real, concrete thing but rather a symbol of a whole group.

In (a) and (b); The speaker is talking about any and all fruit, fruit in general. Notice that no article (0) is used to make generalizations with plural count nouns and noncount nouns, as in (b) and (c).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR COUNT NOUN</th>
<th>(d) I ate a <strong>banana</strong>,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL COUNT NOUN</td>
<td>(e) I ate some <strong>bananas</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NONCOUNT NOUN</td>
<td>(f) I ate some <strong>fruit</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indefinite nouns are actual things (not symbols), but they are not specifically identified.

In (d): The speaker is not referring to “this banana” or “that banana” or “that banana you gave me.” The speaker is simply saying that she ate one banana. The listener does not know nor need to know which specific banana was eaten; it is simply one banana out of that whole group of things in this world called bananas.

In (e) and (f); some is often used with indefinite Plural Count Nouns and indefinite noncount nouns. In addition to some, a speaker might use, a few, several-a lot of, etc., with plural count nouns, or a little, a lot of, etc., with noncount nouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR COUNT NOUN</th>
<th>(g) Thank you for <strong>the banana</strong>.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL COUNT NOUN</td>
<td>(h) Thank you for <strong>the banana</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NONCOUNT NOUN</td>
<td>(i) Thank you for <strong>the fruit</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A noun is definite when both the speaker and the listener are thinking about the same specific thing.

In (g): The speaker uses *the* because the listener knows which specific banana the speaker is talking about, i.e., that particular banana which the listener gave to the speaker.

Notice that *the* is used with both singular and plural count nouns and with noncount nouns.

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Usually *a/an* is used with a singular generic count noun. Examples:

A **window** is made of glass. A **doctor** heals sick people. Parents must give a **child** love. A **box** has six sides. An **apple** can be red, green, or yellow.

**The** is sometimes used with a singular generic count noun (not a plural generic count noun, not a generic noncount noun). “Generic *the*” is commonly used with, in particular:

1. Species of animals: **The whale** is the largest mammal on earth
   - **The elephant** is the largest land mammal.*
2. Inventions: Who invented the **telephone**? The **wheel**? The **refrigerator**? The **airplane**? The **computer** will play an increasingly large role in all of our lives.
3. Musical instruments: I would like to learn to play the **piano**.
   - Do you play the **guitar**?

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D-2 GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ARTICLE USAGE

(a) The sun is bright today. Please hand this book to the teacher. Please open the door. Jack is in the kitchen.

GUIDELINE: Use the when you know or assume that your listener is familiar with and thinking about the same specific thing or person you are talking about.

(b) Yesterday I saw some dogs. The dogs were chasing a cat. The cat was chasing a mouse. The mouse ran into a hole. The hole was very small.

GUIDELINE: Use the for the second mention of an indefinite noun; in (b): first mention some dogs, a cat, a mouse, a hole. Second mention the dogs, the cat, the mouse, the hole.

(c) INCORRECT: The apples are my favorite fruit.
CORRECT: Apples are my favorite fruit.

GUIDELINE: Do not use the with a plural count noun (e.g., apples) or a noncount noun (e.g., gold) when you are making a generalization.

(d) INCORRECT: I drove car.
CORRECT: I drove a car.

GUIDELINE: Do not use a singular count noun (e.g., car) without:
(1) an article (a/an or the); OR
(2) this/that; OR
(3) a possessive pronoun.

EXERCISE 1: In the following dialogues, try to decide whether the speakers would probably use a/an or the.

1. A: I have _______ idea. Let’s go on______ picnic Saturday.
   B: Okay.

2. A: Did you have fun at _____ picnic yesterday?
   B: Sure did. And you?

3. A: You’d better have_______good reason for being late!
   B: I do.

4. A: Did you think______ reason Jack gave for being late was believable?
   B: Not really.

5. A: Where’s my blue shirt?
   B: It’s in______washing machine. You’ll have to wear______different shirt.

6. A: I wish we had______washing machine.
   B: So do I. It would make it a lot easier to do our laundry.

7. A: What happened to your bicycle?_______front wheel is bent.
   B: I ran into_______parked car when I swerved to avoid_______big pothole in the street.
   A: Did you damage_______car?
   B: A little.

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8. A: Can you repair my car for me?
   B: What’s wrong with it?
   A: _______radiator has________leak, and one
       of________windshield wipers doesn’t work.
   B: Can you show me where________leak is?

9. A: Have you seen my boots?
   B: They’re in_______closet in_______front hallway.

EXERCISE 2: Complete the sentences with a/an, the, or leave blank if sentence is already correct.

1. _______beef is a kind of_______meat.
2. _______beef we had for dinner last night was excellent.
3. Jack is wearing_______straw hat today.
4. Jack likes to wear_______hats.
5. _______hat is_______article of clothing.
6. _______hats are_______articles of clothing.
7. _______brown hats on that hook over there belongs to Mark.
8. Everyone has_______problems in _______life.
9. My grandfather had_______long life.
10. That book is about________life of Helen Keller.
11. Tommy wants to be_______engineer when he grows up.
12. The Brooklyn Bridge was designed by_______engineer.
13. John Roebling is_______name of_______engineer who designed
    the Brooklyn Bridge. He died in 1869 from_______infection. He
died before_______bridge was completed.
14. _______people wear_______jewelry to make themselves more
    attractive.
15. _______jewelry Diana is wearing today is beautiful.