



Articles

The articles *a*, *an* and *the* are difficult for many non-native English speakers to learn to use properly. Some of the rules that govern article usage are very subtle; only years of experience with the language will enable you to understand and apply these rules. However, hopefully the following pointers will help you eliminate many errors in article usage from your writing.

To use articles correctly, you first need to understand two basic concepts: countability and definiteness.

Countability: *Countability* refers to a noun's ability to be quantified; that is, whether the noun refers to people, places, or things that can be counted (one dollar/two dollars, one house/ two houses). *Countable* nouns can always be made plural—usually by adding –s or some other variation of the plural ending, e.g. student(s), child(ren). *Uncountable* nouns (also known as *noncount* nouns) often refer to food, beverages, substances, or abstractions (meat, water, information) that cannot be counted in the normal sense (for example you would not say, "Graciela gave me three important informations").

Some nouns, however, can be both countable and uncountable. For example, as an *uncountable* noun, "experience" refers to abstract knowledge or skill that can be gained by observing or participating in events. As a singular or plural *countable* noun, "experience" or "experiences" refers to a particular instance (or instances) of participation in events.

Be Careful! If you are a non-native English speaker, a word that is countable in your native language may be uncountable in English, and vice-versa.

Definiteness: A noun's *definiteness* is the other factor which determines whether an article is needed before a noun. A noun is definite if it refers to something *specific* that is known to both the writer and the reader or, within the text itself, something that is known by both the speaker and the listener. For example, if Jane needs to drive somewhere, she might ask her father, "May I use the car?" She uses the definite article **the** because both she and her father know which car Jane is referring to (the family car). But later Jane might say to her father, "I saw a funny-looking car today." She uses the indefinite article **a** because, although she knows the specific car she saw, her father does not. Nouns usually meet one the following conditions in order to be definite:

- The noun has been previously mentioned

Example: *A* cat wandered into my yard yesterday. [first mention, indefinite]. Then when it saw my dog, *the* cat ran away [second mention, definite].

- The noun refers to a specific or unique person, place, or thing.

Example: *The* tallest girl in the class is six feet tall. [There can be only one girl who is the tallest.]

- The context of the situation makes the noun's identity clear.

Example: Open *the* window.

With these two concepts understood, look at the chart on the back of this handout to see how countability and definiteness combine to determine which, if any, article to use.

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| | Singular Count Nouns | Plural Count Nouns and Noncount Nouns |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Definite | <p><i>With definite singular count nouns, use the.</i></p> <p>-The man next door used to be a famous actor.</p> <p>Note: Singular proper nouns, although definite, do not usually need an article.</p> <p>-Michael Jackson is called "The King of Pop."</p> | <p><i>With definite plural count nouns and definite noncount nouns, use the.</i></p> <p>-The trees planted by Hank are growing quickly.</p> <p>-The meat in the freezer is too old to eat.</p> |
| Indefinite | <p><i>With indefinite singular count nouns use a/an.</i></p> <p>-A strange noise woke me up last night.</p> <p>-An awful noise woke me up last night.</p> | <p><i>With indefinite plural count nouns and indefinite noncount nouns, no article is used.</i></p> <p>-Essays can be difficult to write.</p> <p>-Wool is one of Scotland's major exports.</p> |

Do the following exercise to practice what you've learned.

Exercise

Fill in each blank with the appropriate article, **a/an** or **the**. If no article is required, put **0** in the blank.

- We need to get _____ new phone.
- Alex, would you please answer _____ phone?
- _____ people use _____ plants in _____ many different ways. Plants supply us with oxygen. They make _____ paper and _____ textiles.
- When you look at _____ sandy shore, it might seem practically empty of _____ animals. This appearance is deceptive, however. Beneath _____ surface, the sand is full of _____ life. It is teeming with _____ crabs, _____ worms, _____ snails, and _____ other kinds of _____ marine animals.
- Our children enjoyed going to the beach yesterday. When they dug in _____ sand, they found various kinds of _____ animals. Susie found _____ crab, and so did Johnny. _____ crab Johnny found pinched him, which made him cry. But he had _____ good time at _____ beach anyway.
- The biggest bird in the world is the ostrich. It eats just about anything it can reach, including _____ stones, _____ glass, and _____ keys. It can kill _____ person with one kick.
- Do you ever gaze into _____ space and wonder if _____ other life forms exist in _____ universe?
- _____ most mirrors are made from _____ glass to which _____ think layer of _____ silver or _____ aluminum has been applied.

Answer Key:

- | | |
|----|---------------------------|
| 1. | a |
| 2. | the |
| 3. | 0,0,0,0,0,0 |
| 4. | a, 0, the, 0,0,0,0,0,0 |
| 5. | the, 0, a, the, a, the |
| 6. | 0,0,0,a |
| 7. | 0,0, the |
| 8. | 0,0,a,0,0 |