Articles

Articles are short words used with nouns or noun phrases. They are essential in English, and they modify the nouns with which they are associated. Usage is complicated as it depends on whether the noun is generic, countable or uncountable, singular or plural.

The three articles in the English language are: *a, an,* and ***the.***

Types of articles

The 'definite' article, *The*

Use *the* when you want to refer to a specific thing. For example, *the apple* refers to *this particular* apple, not just any apple.

The 'indefinite' articles, *A* and *An*

Use *a* and *an* when you are not being specific, but want to refer to one of *many* things. For example, *an apple* refers to *any* apple amongst the many apples around, and *a chair* refers to any chair amongst the many chairs around (not a particular apple or chair).

- *A* is used when the noun begins with a consonant, e.g., *a car*, *a book*, *a house* OR a consonant *sound* e.g. *a user* (sounds like *you-ser*), *a university* (sounds like *you-nee-versity*)
- *An* is used when the noun begins with a vowel, e.g., *an apple*, *an umbrella*, *an animal* OR a vowel *sound,* e.g. silent "h" words such as *an hour* (sounds like *aou-er*).

No article

Some nouns or noun phrases **do not use an article** at all. This depends on whether they are *countable* or *uncountable* nouns, or singular or plural nouns. Countable nouns require articles; *but not all* uncountable nouns. Singular nouns require articles, *but not all* plural nouns (e.g., **Singular:** *The university is a good place to work*, but **Plural:** *Universities are good places to work*).

A good general (but not universally applicable) rule is: *every singular countable noun requires an article* (either *the, a* or *an*). To understand this further, we need to look at noun types.

Types of nouns

Article use depends on the kinds of noun used: 1) generic, 2) countable/uncountable, 3) singular or plural. We discuss these noun types below.

'Generic reference' nouns

Some nouns require generic references. By this, we mean *all cases of something everywhere*. This is different from referring to one of many things. When we generalise about things we are referring to every possible example, e.g., an entire species of animal or plant, all guitars in the world, or all body parts. An example of legs belonging to all animals and insects is: *Kangaroos have long legs* (all kangaroos everywhere).

How can you tell if you are using a generic noun?

Try this substitution test: If you can say "All cases of something everywhere," with reference to the noun it is generic; if not, it is indefinite (i.e., one of many, not all cases everywhere). For example:

- *A guitar is no use without its strings* ('All cases of guitars everywhere?' Yes = generic)
- *A guitar is available for sale on eBay* ('All cases of guitars everywhere?' No = not generic, only one of many)
- *A female whale protects its young* (All cases, everywhere? Yes = generic). *A female whale is grounded on the beach* (All cases everywhere? No = only one of many)

Generic nouns either take *the, an/a* or no article at all if they are plural, e.g., *Kangaroos have long legs.*

Countable nouns

A countable noun is a noun you can count and which are separate objects: e.g., one cat, two dogs, 63 books. These take articles before them. I own *a* cat, *a* dog, and *a* book (referring generally); or I own *the* cat, *the* dog, the books (referring to the particular things in question).

There are exceptions: we don't use articles for some unique, countable objects. For example:

- *I am going to Kakadu,* not *the* Kakadu
- *I am going to Sydney Harbour Bridge* (not *the*), but
- *I am going to th*e Sydney Opera House.

Remembering usage patterns is important here.

Uncountable nouns

An uncountable noun (or "mass noun") is a noun you cannot count. They are not separate objects, e.g., *milk, rice, staff, research.* Uncountable nouns can also be abstract in nature, e.g. *love, happiness, friendship, mathematics.*

The indefinite article is not used with uncountable nouns. One cannot normally say 'I have *a* happiness' or 'He has *a* love of his dog' or 'There is *a* milk in the refrigerator'. Similarly, we cannot say: "Can I have *a* rice?' In these cases we often use another countable noun such as *a bowl* of water, *a bottle* of milk, *a grain* of rice.

The definite article can be used with uncountable nouns: '*The* milk is in the refrigerator', '*The* staff need some support', '*The* research is going well'.

So, **determine whether the noun is countable or uncountable**.

If it is countable, or singular generic, it takes an article (*the/a/an*); if uncountable, it may take an indefinite article (*a/an*) but not *the.*

Singular and plural nouns

The examples above *apple, chair, car, book, house, university, umbrella, animal, hour* are all singular nouns. There is only one thing discussed. We'd need to add 's' or 'ies' to make these words plural.

Singular nouns require articles, but not all plural nouns. Plurals take a definite article or no article at all (see table below). Remember the rule, *singular countable nouns require articles.*

Take the noun in question:

a) Is it singular and countable (Yes? = Takes an article)
b) Is it plural countable (Yes? = May or may not take an article)
c) Is it uncountable (Yes? = May or may not take an article)

	A / An	The	No article
Singular countable	A university / A company…	The university / The company…	
Plural countable		The universities / The companies	Universities / Companies…
Uncountable		The friendship / The liquidity	Friendship is / Liquidity can

Refer to the flowchart below and try to follow it when using any noun or noun phrase in English.
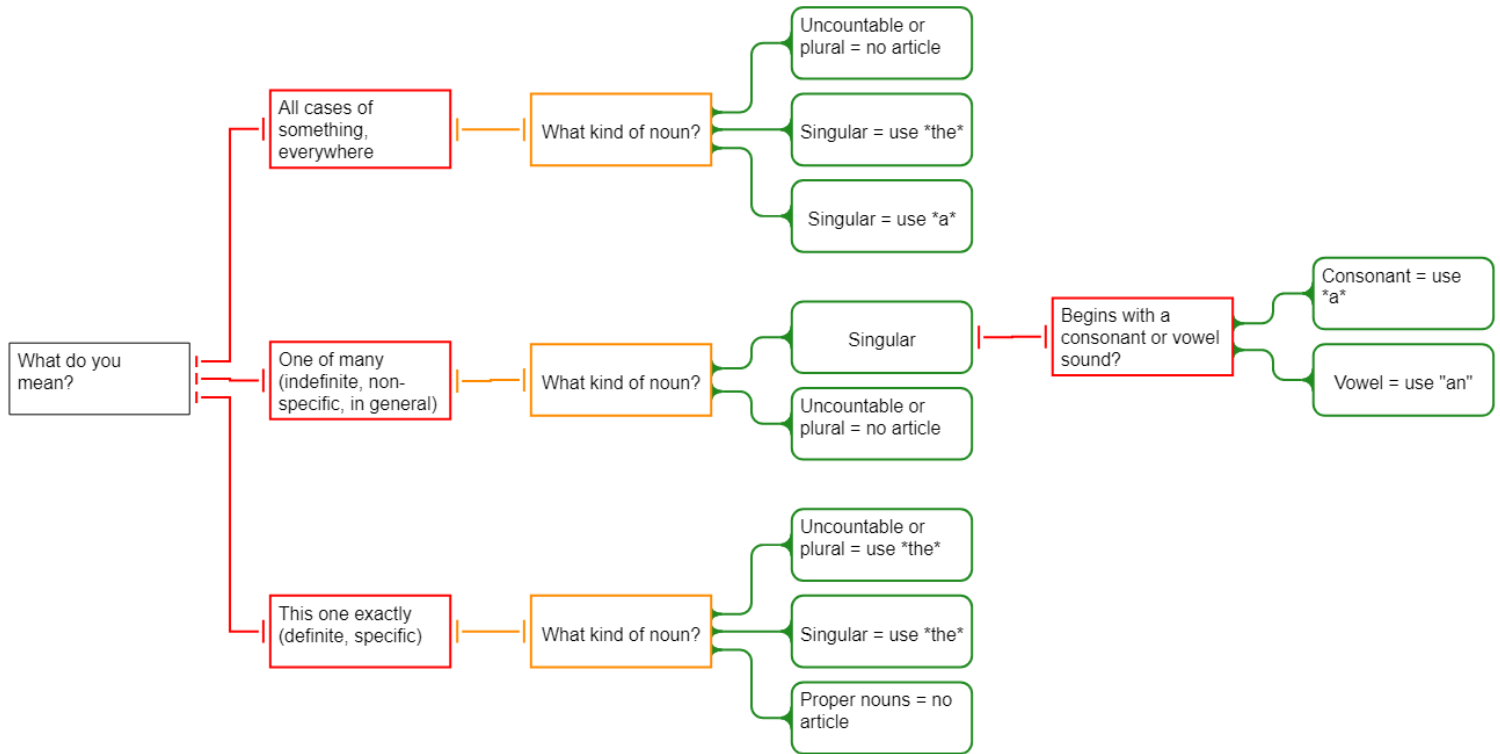
Referring to geographical items

Note the following arbitrary conventions for articles referring to geographical items.

The is <u>not</u> used before:

- Countries/territories (exceptions: the UK, the USA, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic)
- Streets, cities, towns and states, continents, or islands (exceptions: the Hebrides, the Canary Islands)
- Lakes or bays, mountains (exceptions: the Matterhorn, the Rockies, the Andes)

The is used before:

- Rivers, oceans, seas (the Nile, the Pacific, the Indian, the Southern oceans)
- Points on the globe (the Equator, the South Pole)
- Areas (the Middle East, the Western Sahara)
- Deserts, forests peninsulas (the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Sahara).

Activities

1. **COUNTABLE or UNCOUNTABLE NOUN?**
   Circle the correct answer in each example:

   a) **Cheese** is a countable / uncountable noun.
   b) **Apple** is a countable / uncountable noun.
   c) **Puppy** is a countable / uncountable noun.
   d) **Water** is a countable / uncountable noun.
   e) **Mathematics** is a countable / uncountable noun.
   f) **Spain** is a countable / uncountable noun.

2. **ARTICLE or NO ARTICLE?**
   Use the correct article or no article in the following sentences:

   a) I don't like ___ cheese.
   b) I didn't eat ___ cheese on my plate.
   c) ___ apple I just ate was sour.
   d) I don't feel like eating ___ apple just now.
   e) I don't like ____ puppy you just bought.
   f) I want ___ puppy for Christmas!
   g) I need a drink of ___ water.
   h) The dog jumped into ___ water.
   i) My favourite subject is ___ mathematics.
   j) I want to go to ___ Spain

Other helpsheets available

- Apostrophes
- Capitalisation
- Punctuation
- Sentence Structure
- Writing in an Academic Style

References

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