

# Article Usage

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## Introduction

The articles “a,” “an,” and “the” are difficult for many non-native speakers of English 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, **Table 3** will help you eliminate many errors in article usage from your writing.

In order to use **Table 3**, however, you have to understand two concepts: **countability** and **definiteness**. These concepts are explained in detail below. The last part of this handout, beginning on page 7, discusses article usage with proper nouns as well as the difference between “a” and “an.” At the very end of the handout is an exercise that you can do to test your understanding.

## Countability

**Countable** nouns refer to people, places, or things that can be counted (one dollar/two dollars, one house/two houses). They can always be made plural—usually by adding *-s* or some other variation of the plural ending (students, countries, children). A few words are the same in both the singular and plural forms (deer, sheep).

**Uncountable** nouns often refer to food, beverages, substances, or abstractions (meat, tea, steel, information); *some* uncountable nouns (but not the abstract ones) can be made countable by adding a **count frame** in front of them (*two gallons of milk, six blocks of ice, a bar of soap, a bunch of celery*).

Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable even without adding count frames. 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/experiences”), it refers to a particular instance (or instances) of participation in events. Similarly, the uncountable noun “glass” is a substance made from silicates; “a glass” (singular) is something you drink out of; and “glasses” (plural) are frames containing lenses that correct imperfect vision.

There are other exceptions to the countable/uncountable distinction as well. Moreover, a noun that is countable in your native language may be uncountable in English, and vice-versa. For example, “soap” is countable in Spanish but uncountable in English. However, as long as you are aware of these differences, they probably won’t cause you much difficulty.

Learning Hint #1: The best thing to do is to memorize some of the most frequently occurring uncountable nouns (shown in **Table I**), and to look up other nouns in a dictionary if you are not sure whether they are countable or uncountable. If your dictionary does not indicate whether nouns are countable or uncountable, then you should consult another dictionary, such as *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. This dictionary is available for you to use at the Writing Center.

In the *Oxford* dictionary, nouns are countable unless they are designated by the letter [u]. If a noun can be either countable or uncountable (with different definitions, as in the examples given above), then the uncountable definitions are preceded by [u], and the countable definitions are preceded by [c], as in the following example.

ad.ven.ture n 1 [c] a strange or unusual happening (The explorer told the boys about his adventure in the Arctic). 2 [u] risk; danger (Robin Hood lives a life of adventure.)

**Table 1: Some Common Uncountable English Nouns**

**Food and drink:** bacon, beef, beer, bread, broccoli, butter, cabbage, candy, cauliflower, celery, cereal, cheese, chicken, chocolate, coffee, corn, cream, fish, flour, fruit, ice cream, lettuce, meat, milk, oil, pasta, rice, salt, spinach, sugar, tea, water, wine, yogurt

**Nonfood substances:** air, cement, coal, dirt, gasoline, gold, ice, leather, paper, petroleum, plastic, rain, rubber, silver, snow, soap, steel, wood, wool

**Abstract nouns:** advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, employment, fun, happiness, health, honesty, information, intelligence, knowledge, love, poverty, satisfaction, truth, wealth

**Others:** biology (and other areas of study), clothing, equipment, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, lumber, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, traffic, transportation, violence, weather, work

### Definiteness

A noun is **definite** if it refers to something specific that is known to *both* the writer/speaker and the reader/listener. (Note: You should memorize this definition!) 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 she might say to her friend Bill, “I saw **a** funny-looking dog today.” She uses the **indefinite article** “a” because *she* knows which dog she saw, but Bill doesn't.

**Table 2** illustrates that there are four possible conditions involved in this decision, but only one results in a noun that is definite.

**Table 2: Matrix of Definiteness/Indefiniteness\***

		<i>Knows specifically what is being referred to?</i>	
		<b>Writer/speaker</b>	<b>Reader/listener</b>
definite:	Can I use the car?	Yes	Yes
indefinite:	I saw a funny-looking dog today.	Yes	No
indefinite:	I heard that you once wrote a book about ecology.	No	Yes
indefinite:	I need to buy a new belt.	No	No

\* adapted from Brown, R. *A First Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

## Five Sources of Definiteness

There are five principal ways in which a reader/listener can know specifically what a noun is referring to (that is, five reasons a noun might be considered definite):

1. The noun has been previously mentioned.

I saw a funny-looking dog yesterday [first mention, indefinite]. It looked like a cross between a Pekinese and a German shepherd. When it saw my cat, the dog ran away [second mention, definite].

2. A superlative or ranking adjective makes the noun's identity specific.

The tallest girl in the class is 6'2" tall. [There can be only one girl who is the tallest.]

Please read the fourth paragraph on page 3. [There can be only one fourth paragraph.]

Today is the most important day of my life. [There can be only one day that is the most important.]

3. The noun describes a unique person, place, or thing.

The earth revolves around the sun once every 365 days. [There is only one earth and only one sun--in our solar system, that is!]

4. A modifying word, phrase, or clause follows the noun and makes it clear which specific person or thing you are referring to. But not every noun that is modified in this way is definite; it depends largely on the situation and on what you can reasonably expect your listener/reader to know about.

Do you remember the girl who went camping with us?

[Using *the* here implies that there was only one girl who went camping with you; otherwise the clause *who went camping with us* would not be sufficient to identify the particular girl that you are referring to. If there were two girls, then you would have to be more specific, saying perhaps "Do you remember *the girl from Iowa who went camping with us last May?*" ]

John is reading a book *about quantum physics*.

[Here the noun *book* is modified by the phrase *about quantum physics*. But there is undoubtedly more than one book about quantum physics. Therefore,

to make *book* definite, we would have to add more information: the book about quantum physics that was assigned by Professor Jackson last week.]

5. The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear. For example, you might ask someone to "Close the door." You would use *the* because it would undoubtedly be clear to both of you which door you were referring to. Similarly, if you tell someone that you are going to the library, that person will assume that you are talking about whichever library is most familiar to both of you—RPI's Folsom Library, for example.

Again, you have to be sure that your reader or listener has the same context or situation in mind that you are thinking of; otherwise, he or she will be confused by your use of *the*. For example, one student wrote the following sentence.

This magazine helps women analyze the problematic situation and offers possible remedies.

But this was the first time she had mentioned a problematic situation. Her readers were therefore confused, because her use of the word *the* implied that they were already supposed to know which problematic situation she was referring to.

### **Choosing the Appropriate Article**

In order to choose the appropriate article for a noun, you first need to decide whether the noun is singular. One way to determine this is to ask yourself whether you could put the number "one" in front of it. For example, you can say "one *experiment*," but not "one *knowledge*" or "one *examples*;" therefore, "experiment" is singular, whereas "knowledge" is uncountable and "examples" is plural.

**Table 3** shows that if the noun is singular, you must use either "the" or "a"/"an" in front of the noun, depending on whether it is definite (known to both yourself and your readers) or not.

If the noun is not singular, then it must be either plural or uncountable. **Table 3** shows that article usage is the same for both plural and uncountable nouns: you will use either "the" or "0" (no article) in front of the noun. Again, the final decision depends on whether the noun is definite or not.

**Table 3: Choosing the Appropriate Article**

**Singular Nouns** (one of something that is countable)

**Is the noun definite?**

**Yes:** Use “the”

*The painting in the living room was given to me by an old friend.*

“Painting” and “living room” are singular because we are referring to only one painting and one living room. “Painting” is definite because the following phrase, *in the living room*, makes it clear which painting we are referring to (reason 4, above). (However, it could be indefinite if there is more than one painting in the living room that the speaker could be referring to; in that case, the speaker would say “A painting....”). “Living room” is definite because it is clear from the context of the situation that the speaker is referring to the living room closest to where he and the listener are standing (reason 5, above).

**No:** Use “a” or “an”

*Eugene’s lunch consisted of a sandwich, two cookies, and a can of soda.*

“Sandwich” and “can” are both singular (there is only one of each). They *could* be definite if the listener/reader had seen Eugene’s sandwich and can of soda, or if they had been mentioned before. However, the speaker/writer’s choice of the indefinite article “a” for both nouns tells us that they are unknown to the listener/reader.

**Plural or Uncountable Nouns**

**Is the noun definite?**

**Yes:** Use “the”

*The technical reports that I gave you are top secret.* (plural and definite)

“Reports” is plural (ends in -s) because we are talking about more than one report. It is definite because the following phrase, *that I gave you*, makes it clear to the reader/listener which reports you are referring to (reason 4, above).

*The wool that is produced in Scotland is used to make sweaters.* (uncountable and definite)

“Wool” is uncountable (you cannot say “one wool”). It is definite because the following clause, *that is produced in Scotland*, makes it clear which wool you are referring to (reason 4, above).

**No: Use 0 (no article)**

*Long reports are difficult to write.* (plural and indefinite)

“Reports” is plural (note that it ends in -s). The lack of an article in front of it means that the speaker/writer is talking not about particular reports that are known to the listener/reader, but about all long reports in general.

*Scotland’s major exports are wool and oil.* (uncountable and indefinite)

“Wool” and “oil” are both uncountable nouns (you cannot say “one wool” or “one oil” in this context). They are indefinite because they refer to these two substances in general, not to particular shipments of wool and oil that are known to the reader/listener.

Learning Hint #2: One of the most common mistakes that non-native speakers make with articles is using “a” or “an” with plural or uncountable nouns (*a students* and *a research* would be incorrect). But consider that the articles “a” and “an” are derived from the word “one.” Thus, it is illogical to use “a” or “an” with a plural noun, isn't it? It is also illogical to use “a” or “an” with an uncountable noun--After all, how can you have “one” of something that is uncountable?

An easy way to eliminate a lot of mistakes is to look through your writing for every occurrence of “a” and “an.” Then examine the noun that follows each “a” or “an.” If the noun is either plural or uncountable, then you have made a mistake, and you should refer to **Table 3** to determine whether to use “the” or “0” instead.

Learning Hint #3: Often mistakes occur not because a writer has used the wrong article (e.g., “a” or “an” instead of “the”), but because the writer has used no article at all for a singular noun. Notice in **Table 3** that every singular noun must have an article in front of it.

Learning Hint #4: Notice that every definite noun takes the article “the,” regardless of whether it is singular, plural, or uncountable. Therefore, if you cannot decide whether a noun is singular, plural, or uncountable, go on to the next step and ask yourself whether it is definite (known to both the writer/speaker and the reader/listener) or not. If it is definite, then use “the.”

### Using Articles With Proper Nouns

So far we have been talking only about using articles with common nouns. The rules for proper nouns are more complex.

**Proper nouns** are names of particular people, places, and things (John F. Kennedy, New York City, Notre Dame Cathedral), and for that reason they are inherently definite. Nevertheless, the definite article is not used with most **singular** proper nouns. For example, if you are referring to your friend George, you wouldn't say “*The* George and I went to a movie last night.” The only times “the” is used with a name like this are: a) when you want to be emphatic, as in “*the* Elizabeth Taylor” (to emphasize that you are talking about the famous actress, and not about another woman with the same name), and b) when you are actually using the name as a common noun, as in “*the* George that I introduced you to last night” (the real meaning of this phrase is *the man named*

George...”). **Plural** names, on the other hand, are always preceded by “the”: the Johnsons, the Bahamas, etc.

Singular geographical names are very irregular with respect to article usage. For example, singular names of continents (Asia, Africa), mountains (Mount Fuji), and bays (San Francisco Bay) do not take the article “the,” but regions (the Crimea), deserts (the Sahara), and other geographical entities do.

Indeed, the use of articles with singular proper nouns is complex and hence difficult to learn, as indicated by the examples below. For this reason, the best thing to do is to memorize whether the proper nouns that you use frequently are used with or without “the.”

Examples:

State Street  
the Empire State Building  
Delaware County  
Great Britain  
the Soviet Union  
the University of Virginia  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
the United Nations (the U.N.)  
the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (but “OPEC,” not “the OPEC”)

### “A” Versus “An”

This last topic is undoubtedly the easiest, because most non-native speakers already know about the difference between “a” and “an.” They are simply two variations of the **indefinite article**. “A” is used before words that begin with consonant sounds (a rock, a large park) and “an” is used before vowel sounds (an interesting subject, an apple).

However, note that the choice of “a” or “an” depends on pronunciation, not spelling. Many words that begin with the vowel *-u-* are preceded by “a” instead of “an” because the *-u-* spelling is often pronounced *-yu-*, as in *useful* (“a useful idea”), and *uranium* (“a uranium isotope”). In addition, in a few words that were borrowed from French, the initial consonant *-h-* is not pronounced: an heir to the throne, an hour-long lecture, an honorable agreement, etc.

## **A Strategy For Success**

Keep in mind that native speakers of English seldom use articles incorrectly; therefore, any errors that you make are very noticeable and distracting to them. That is why you should make an effort to use articles correctly.

Study this handout – particularly the “Five Sources of Definiteness,” **Table 3**, and the learning hints. Memorize the definition of definiteness (“known to both the writer/speaker and the reader/listener”). Then try the Exercise toward the end of this handout; the correct answers are provided on the following page so that you can check your work.

In the future, whenever you write in English, you will need to proofread your writing carefully and to apply the rules for article usage very deliberately. Then come to the Writing Center and ask a tutor specifically to correct any remaining errors in your article usage. With practice, you can learn to use articles correctly!

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