

UMSL Writing Center – Revising Writing

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

n 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.

vs.

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

SINGULAR COUNT NOUN,	(a) A banana is yellow.*	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).
PLURAL COUNT NOUN	(b) 0 Bananas are yellow.	
NONCOUNT NOUN	(c) 0 Fruit is good for you.	
SINGULAR COUNT NOUN,	(d) I ate a banana ,	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, <i>a few, several-a lot of, etc.</i> , with plural count nouns, or a little, a lot of, etc. , with noncount nouns.
PLURAL COUNT NOUN	(e) I ate some bananas .	
NONCOUNT NOUN	(f) I ate some fruit.	
III. USING THE: DEFINITE NOUNS		
SINGULAR COUNT NOUN,	(g) Thank you for <i>the banana</i> .	A noun is definite when both the speaker and the listener are thinking about the same specific thing. In (g): The speaker uses <i>the</i> 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 <i>the</i> is used with both singular and plural count nouns and with noncount nouns.
PLURAL COUNT NOUN	(h) Thank you for <i>the banana</i> .	
NONCOUNT NOUN	(i) Thank you for <i>the fruit</i> .	

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**?

D-2 GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ARTICLE USAGE

<p>(a) The sun is bright today. Please hand this book to the teacher. Please open the door. Jack is in the kitchen.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>(b) Yesterday I saw <i>some dogs</i>. The dogs were chasing a <i>cat</i>. The cat was chasing a <i>mouse</i>. The mouse ran into a <i>hole</i>. The hole was very small.</p>	<p>GUIDELINE: Use the for the second mention of an indefinite noun; in (b): first mention <i>some dogs, a cat, a mouse, a hole</i>. Second mention <i>the dogs, the cat, the mouse, the hole</i>.</p>
<p>(c) INCORRECT The apples are <i>my favorite fruit</i> CORRECT Apples are my favorite fruit. (d) INCORRECT <i>The gold is a metal</i>. CORRECT Gold is a metal.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>(e) INCORRECT: I <i>drove</i> car. CORRECT: I drove a car. I drove the car. I drove that car.</p>	<p>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.</p>

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

- A: I have _____ idea. Let's go on _____ picnic Saturday.
B: Okay.
- A: Did you have fun at _____ picnic yesterday?
B: Sure did. And you?
- A: You'd better have _____ good reason for being late!
B: I do.
- A: Did you think _____ reason Jack gave for being late was believable?
B: Not really.
- A: Where's my blue shirt?
B: It's in _____ washing machine. You'll have to wear _____ different shirt.
- A: I wish we had _____ washing machine.
B: So do I. It would make it a lot easier to do our laundry.
- 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.

A: What did you do?

B: I left _____ note for _____ owner of _____ car.

A: What did you write on _____ note?

B: My name and address. I also wrote _____ apology.

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.