Articles

In English, articles (the, a/an, no article) are important in clarifying the meaning of a noun. Articles can be particularly challenging for English Language Learners, as other languages have different rules for articles or don’t have any articles at all. This is a general guide for when to use which articles; however, there are exceptions to the rules, and sometimes personal choice plays a role. See the reverse side of this handout for further explanation and details.

First, ask what the noun means.

Next, ask what kind of noun it is.

Finally, choose an article (or not).

General or Undescribed

non-count

no article

Water is essential to life on earth.

a/an

A mouse is an animal.

A mouse ran under the fridge.

singular

no article

Cats like to eat mice.

plural

no article

The water at the beach is cold.

Specific

non-count

the

The mouse was white with red eyes.

the

The cats in the movie talked and sang.

The

A mouse ran under the fridge.

The

A mouse is an animal.

the

Cats like to eat mice.

the

The water at the beach is cold.
General versus Specific

**General (or Undescribed)** nouns may refer to everything or all of something or to a particular thing that the reader has no previous knowledge of and is not described in specific detail (*A mouse ran under the fridge*).

**Specific nouns** refer to something described or that the reader has previous knowledge of. Keep in mind that once you mention something in a text (*A mouse ran under the fridge*), the next time you mention it the reader will have previous knowledge of it, making it specific and therefore requiring the article “the” (*The mouse stayed under the fridge so the cat wouldn’t eat it*).

Non-Count versus Count (Singular/Plural)

**Non-count** nouns cannot be counted because they are seen as indivisible wholes (milk, furniture, education) and are often abstract ideas (love, anger, freedom). Some nouns can be both count and non-count depending on the context.

*Non-count: Light travels faster than sound.*

*Count: There were different colored lights and strange sounds coming from the tent.*

**Count** nouns can be counted and can be either singular (only one) or plural (more than one). Plural nouns usually add –s or –es to the end of the noun, but there are many nouns that have irregular plural forms (one mouse, many mice).

---

Other Article “Rules”

- Use **no article** with people’s names, languages, sports/games, and academic subjects.
  - We talked to John and Jane about their plans for the holidays.
  - She knows how to speak English, Spanish, and Chinese.
  - The kids are playing football in the yard.
  - This quarter I’m taking math, English, and music.
- Use “**the**” when there is only one of something.
  - The President vetoed the bill.
  - Looking directly at the sun will damage your eyes.
- Countries usually use **no article**, but if it includes “united,” “union,” or “republic” it will use “**the.**”
  - China, Brazil, Japan
  - The United States, The Soviet Union, The Republic of the Philippines
- Use “**a**” when the noun starts with a consonant and “**an**” when it starts with a vowel

In many cases articles are necessary, but there are times when article use is discretionary and depends on the meaning you’re trying to convey. For example, using “the” can sometimes emphasize a noun’s importance. Pay attention to how others use articles and the effect it has.