

Articles

What this handout is about

Articles are important basic elements of English grammar, but they can be confusing for those whose second language is English. This handout describes what articles are and the difference between noncount and count nouns. It also explains three basic rules that are the foundation of the article system and two basic questions that will help you choose the correct article in your writing. It provides examples of articles being used in context, and it ends with a section on special considerations for nouns in academic writing.

Using this handout

As you use the handout, try to keep three things in mind:

- First, this handout will be most effective if you use it as a tool. Every time you read this handout, read it along side another piece of writing (a journal article, a magazine, a web page, a novel, a text book, etc.). Locate a few nouns in the reading, and use the handout to analyze the article usage. If you practice a little bit at a time, this kind of analysis can help you develop a natural sensitivity to this complex system.
- Second, using articles correctly is a skill that develops over time through lots of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Think about the rules in this handout, but also try to pay attention to how articles are being used in the language around you. Simply paying attention can also help you develop a natural sensitivity to this complex system.
- Finally, although using the wrong article may distract a reader's attention, it usually does not prevent the reader from understanding your meaning. So be patient with yourself as you learn.

What is an article?

An article is a word placed before a noun to indicate whether the noun is talking about a specific thing, or about a thing in general. There are only three articles in the English language: "a," "an," and "the." These articles are divided into two categories: definite articles and indefinite articles.

Knowing when to use which type of article depends on whether the noun you are attaching it to is a specific or general thing you are referring to, and if the noun is either a count noun or a noncount noun.

Definite articles

The word "the" is what is called a definite article. This means that when "the" is placed before a noun, it means that the noun is referring to a specific thing. For example, here are a few nouns with the definite article placed in front of them:

The tree

The school

The car

The airplane

Notice how placing the definite article "the" before each noun makes each noun specific? It is not just any tree, but it is THE tree. It is not just any car, but it is THE car. The specific nature of the nouns are better seen when they are used in a sentence:

I saw the car you told me about yesterday.

My father cut down the tree in our backyard.

There is the school that my brother attended.

The airplane we flew to New York was painted red.

Indefinite articles

The articles "a" and "an" are indefinite articles. Placed before nouns, they make the nouns general, not referring to any specific thing. The indefinite article "an" is placed before nouns that start with vowels. Compare the same words listed above with the same words below, only with indefinite articles placed before them:

A tree

A school

A car

An airplane

Notice how each noun now just refers to items in general, and not specifically? It is not a specific tree, but just A tree, not any specific school, but just A school in general, and so on. See how they function in the following sentences with the indefinite articles:

We drove past a tree on our way to the store.

He used to work at a school before he became mayor.

Mary wanted a car for her eighteenth birthday.

I watched an airplane fly overhead while I sat in my chair.

Count and noncount nouns

Using the correct article depends not only on whether you are referring to a specific or a general thing, but also if the type of noun you are using is a **count noun** or a **noncount noun**.

Count nouns

Count nouns are nouns that can be counted and can be made into a plural form. They are usually nouns that, when you add "s" at the end of them, show that there is more than one thing. For example, the singular of car is "car," but when you mean more than one car, it becomes "cars." This is an example of a count noun. Count nouns can use **definite** or **indefinite** articles (for example, depending on the situation, you can use either "a cat" or "the cat").

Noncount nouns

Noncount nouns are nouns that cannot be made into a plural form. They are often abstract things or items that cannot be counted. Some examples of noncount nouns are salt, wine, anger, happiness, poetry, and weather. **Noncount nouns DO NOT use indefinite articles** (for example, you can say "the weather" or "the traffic," but you cannot say "a weather" or "a traffic").

Basic rules for using articles

This is a simple list, but understanding it and remembering it is crucial to using articles correctly. (Note: "Ø" = no article needed)

Rule # 1: Every time a noun is mentioned, the writer is referring to:

1. All of them everywhere,
2. One of many, or
3. This one exactly

Rule # 2: Every kind of reference has a choice of articles:

1. All of them everywhere (Ø, a/an, the)
2. One of many (Ø, a/an)
3. This one exactly (Ø, the)

Rule # 3: The choice of article depends upon the noun and the context. This will be explained more fully below.

Basic questions

To choose the best article, ask yourself these questions:

1. "What do I mean? Do I mean all of them everywhere, one of many, or this one exactly?"
2. "What kind of noun is it? Is it countable or not? Is it singular or plural? Does it have any special rules?"

Your answers to these questions will usually determine the correct article choice, and the following sections will show you how.

When you mean "all of them everywhere"

Talking about "all of them everywhere" is also called **generic reference**. We use it to make generalizations, or to say something true of all the nouns in a particular group, like an entire species of animal.

When you mean "all of them everywhere," you have three article choices: Ø (no article), "a"/"an," and "the." The choice of article depends on the noun. Ask yourself, "What kind of noun is it?"

1. Noncount nouns = no article (Ø)

- a. Temperature is measured in degrees.
- b. Money makes the world go around.

2. Plural nouns = no article (Ø)

- a. Volcanoes are formed by pressure under the earth's surface.
- b. Quagga zebras were hunted to extinction.

3. Singular nouns = "the"

- a. The computer is a marvelous invention.
- b. The elephant lives in family groups.

Note: We use this form ("the" + singular) most often in technical and scientific writing to generalize about classes of animals, body organs, plants, musical instruments, and complex inventions. We do not use this form for simple inanimate objects, like books or coat racks. For these objects, use (Ø + plural).

Singular nouns = "a"/"an" (when a single example represents the entire group)

- a. A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet.
- b. A doctor is a highly educated person. Generally speaking, a doctor also has tremendous earning potential.

How do you know it's generic? The "all...everywhere" test.

Here's a simple test you can use to identify generic references while you're reading. To use this test, substitute "all [plural noun] everywhere" for the noun phrase. If the statement is still true, it's probably a generic reference. For example:

- A whale protects its young—"All whales everywhere" protect their young. (True—generic reference)
- A whale is grounded on the beach—"All whales everywhere" are grounded on the beach. (Not true, so this is not a generic reference; this "a" refers to "one of many")

You'll probably find generic references most often in the introduction and conclusion sections and at the beginning of a paragraph that introduces a new topic.

When you mean "one of many"

Talking about "one of many" is also called **indefinite reference**. We use it when the noun's exact identity is unknown to one of the participants: the reader, the writer, or both. Sometimes it's not possible for the reader or the writer to identify the noun exactly; sometimes it's not important. In either case, the noun is just "one of many." It's "indefinite."

When you mean "one of many," you have two article choices: no article (\emptyset), or "a"/"an." The choice of article depends on the noun. Ask yourself, "What kind of noun is it?"

1. Non-count nouns = no article (\emptyset)

- a. Our science class mixed boric acid with water today.
- b. We serve bread and water on weekends.

2. Plural nouns = no article (\emptyset)

- a. We're happy when people bring cookies!
- b. We need volunteers to help with community events.

3. Singular nouns = "a"/"an"

- a. Bring an umbrella if it looks like rain.
- b. You'll need a visa to stay for more than ninety days.

Note: We use many different expressions for an indefinite quantity of plural or noncount nouns. Words like "some," "several," and "many" use no article (for example: "We need some volunteers to help this afternoon. We really need several people at 3:00.") One exception: "a few" + plural noun. ("We need a few people at 3:00.")

In certain situations, we always use "a" or "an." These situations include:

1. Referring to something that is one of a number of possible things.

Example: My lab is planning to purchase a new microscope. (Have you chosen one yet? No, we're still looking at a number of different models.)

2. Referring to one specific part of a larger quantity.

Example: Can I have a bowl of cereal and a slice of toast? (Don't you want the whole box of cereal and the whole loaf of bread? No, thanks. Just a bowl and a slice will be fine.)

3. With certain indefinite quantifiers.

Example: We met many interesting people last night. (You can also say "a bunch of" or "a ton of" when you want to be vague about the exact quantity. Note that these expressions are all phrases: a + quantifier + of.)

Exception: "A few of" does not fit this category. See Number 8 in the next section for the correct usage of this expression.

4. Specifying information associated with each item of a grouping.

Example: My attorney asked for \$200 an hour, but I'll offer him \$200 a week instead. (In this case, "a" can substitute for the word "per.")

5. Introducing a noun to the reader for the first time (also called "first mention"). Use "the" for each subsequent reference to that noun if you mean "this one exactly."

Example: I presented a paper last month, and my advisor wants me to turn the paper into an article. If I can get the article written this semester, I can take a break after that. I really need a break.

Note: The writer does not change from "a break" to "the break" with the second mention because she is not referring to one break in particular ("this break exactly"). It's indefinite—any break will be fine.

When you mean "this one exactly"

Talking about "this one exactly" is also called **definite reference**. We use it when both the reader and the writer can identify the exact noun that is being referred to.

When you mean "this one exactly," you have two article choices: Ø and "the." The choice of article depends on the noun and on the context. Ask yourself, "What kind of noun is it?"

1. (Most) Proper nouns = no article (Ø)

- a. My research will be conducted in Luxembourg.
- b. Dr. Homer inspired my interest in Ontario.

Note: Some proper nouns do require "the." See the special notes on nouns below.

2. Noncount nouns = "the"

- a. Step two: mix the water with the boric acid.
- b. The laughter of my children is contagious.

3. Plural nouns = "the"

- a. We recruited the nurses from General Hospital.
- b. The projects described in your proposal will be fully funded.

4. Singular nouns = "the"

- a. Bring the umbrella in my closet if it looks like rain.
- b. Did you get the visa you applied for?

In certain situations, we always use "the" because the noun or the context makes it clear that we're talking about "this one exactly." The context might include the words surrounding the noun or the context of knowledge that people share. Examples of these situations include:

1. Unique nouns

- a. The earth rotates around the sun.
- b. The future looks bright!

2. Shared knowledge (both participants know what's being referred to, so it's not necessary to specify with any more details)

- a. The boss just asked about the report.
- b. Meet me in the parking lot after the show.

3. Second mention (with explicit first mention)

- a. I found a good handout on English articles. The handout is available online.
- b. You can get a giant ice cream cone downtown. If you can eat the cone in five seconds, you get another one free.

4. Second mention (with implied first mention—this one is very, very common)

- a. Dr. Frankenstein performed a complicated surgery. He said the patient is recovering nicely. ("The patient" is implied by "surgery"—every surgery has a patient.)
- b. My new shredder works fabulously! The paper is completely destroyed. (Again, "the paper" is implied by "shredder.")

5. Ordinals and superlatives (first, next, primary, most, best, least, etc.)

- a. The first man to set foot on the moon...
- b. The greatest advances in medicine...

6. Specifiers (sole, only, principle, etc.)

- a. The sole purpose of our organization is...
- b. The only fact we need to consider is...

7. Restricters (words, phrases, or clauses that restrict the noun to one definite meaning)

- a. Study the chapter on osmosis for the test tomorrow.
- b. Also study the notes you took at the lecture that Dr. Science gave yesterday.

8. Plural nouns in partitive "-of" phrases (phrases that indicate parts of a larger whole) (Note: Treat "of the" as a chunk in these phrases—both words in or both words out)

- a. Most of the international students (emphasis on part of the group)
- b. Most international students (emphasis on the group as a whole)
- c. Several of the risk factors (emphasis on part of the group)
- d. Several risk factors (emphasis on the group as a whole)
- e. A few of the examples (emphasis on part of the group)

f. A few examples (emphasis on the group as a whole)

Note: "Few examples" is different from "a few examples." Compare:
The teacher gave a few good examples. (emphasizes the presence of good examples)
The teacher gave few good examples. (emphasizes the lack of good examples)

Some notes about nouns

Noncount nouns fall into several categories:

- Abstractions: laughter, information, beauty, love, work, knowledge
- Fields of study: biology, medicine, history, civics, politics (some end in "-s" but are non-count)
- Recreational activities: football, camping, soccer, dancing (these words often end in "-ing")
- Natural phenomena: weather, rain, sunshine, fog, snow (but events are countable: a hurricane, a blizzard, a tornado)
- Whole groups of similar/identical objects: furniture, luggage, food, money, cash, clothes
- Liquids, gases, solids, and minerals: water, air, gasoline, coffee, wood, iron, lead, boric acid
- Powders and granules: rice, sand, dust, calcium carbonate
- Diseases: cancer, diabetes, schizophrenia (but traumas are countable: a stroke, a heart attack, etc.)

Different languages might classify nouns differently

"Research" and "information" are good examples of nouns that are noncount nouns in American English but count nouns in other languages and other varieties of English.

Strategy: Check a dictionary. A learner's dictionary will indicate whether the noun is countable or not. A regular dictionary will give a plural form if the noun is countable.

Some nouns have both count and noncount meanings

Some nouns have both count and non-count meanings in everyday usage. Some noncount nouns have count meanings only for specialists in a particular field who consider distinct varieties of something that an average person would not differentiate.

Noncount meanings follow the rules for noncount nouns (generic and indefinite reference: no article; definite: "the"); count meanings follow the count rules ("a"/"an" for singular, no article for plural). Can you see the difference between these examples?

- John's performance on all three exams was exceptional.
- John's performances of Shakespeare were exceptional.
- To be well educated, you need good instruction.
- To assemble a complicated machine, you need good instructions.

Proper nouns

Proper nouns (names of people, places, religions, languages, etc.) **are always definite**. They take either "the" or no article. Use "the" for regions (like the Arctic) and for a place that's made up of a collection of smaller parts (like a collection of islands, mountains, lakes, etc.).

Examples:

- Places (singular, no article): Lake Erie, Paris, Zimbabwe, Mount Rushmore
- Places (collective, regional, "the"): the Great Lakes, the Middle East, the Caribbean

Note: Proper nouns in theory names may or may not take articles

When a person's name is part of a theory, device, principle, law, etc., use "the" when the name **does not** have a possessive apostrophe. Do not use "the" when the name has an apostrophe.

Examples:

- the Doppler effect
- Einstein's theory of relativity
- the Pareto index
- Murphy's law
- the Riemann hypothesis
- Halley's comet

Note: Articles change when proper nouns function as adjectives

Notice how the article changes with "Great Lakes" in the examples below. When place names are used as adjectives, follow the article rule for the noun they are modifying.

Examples:

I'm studying ...

- ...the Great Lakes. (as noun)
- ...a Great Lakes shipwreck. (as adjective with "one of many" singular noun)
- ...the newest Great Lakes museum. (as adjective with "this one exactly" singular noun)
- ...Great Lakes shipping policies. (as adjective with "one of many" plural noun)
- ...Great Lakes history. (as adjective with "one of many" uncountable noun)

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries' citation tutorial.

Byrd, Patricia and Beverly Benson. *Problem/Solution: A Reference for ESL Writers*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1993.

Celce-Murcia, Marianne and Diane Larsen-Freeman. *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*. 2nd edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999.

Swales, John and Christine Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Skills and Tasks*. 2nd edition. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

The following online article is especially helpful because it has exercises at the end:
Kohl, John R. "Article Usage." The Writing Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.
Available at <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/lc/writecenter/web/esl.html>

This handout was adapted from the "Articles" handout from the University of North Carolina Writing Center handouts collection.