

Articles in English Grammar

Writing Centre Learning Guide

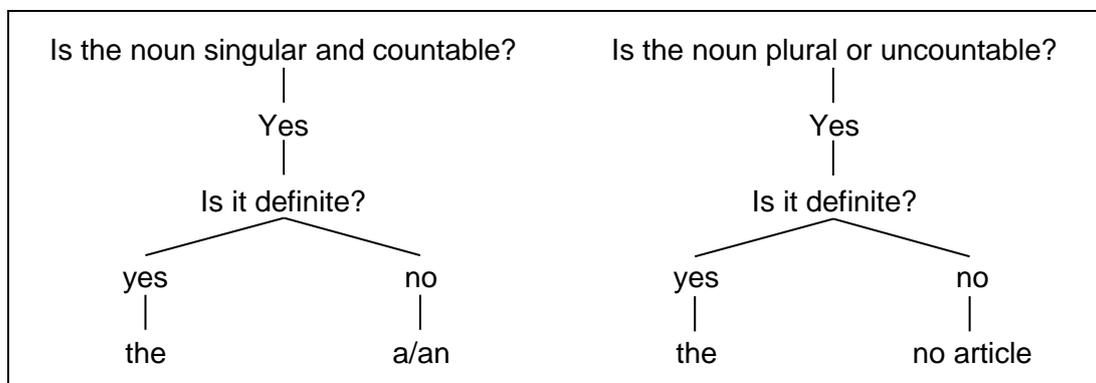
The words 'a', 'an' and 'the', known as articles, present problems for most speakers of English as an additional language. This is not surprising, since there is no equivalent construction in many languages, and those languages that do have articles do not necessarily use them in the same way as English.

Introduction

It is often difficult to decide whether an English noun needs an article before it, and, if so, which article (a/an/the) to use. The main things to consider when choosing an article are whether or not the noun is countable, and whether it is definite. **Countability** means that the noun can be made plural, e.g. *book/books*. This is something you can check in a learner's dictionary of English. Whether a noun is definite or indefinite depends on whether you and your reader or listener both know what you are referring to. The following pages give you some guidelines on what makes a noun countable and/or definite. Much of the information is based on the work of Master (1986) and Swales and Feak (1994).

When you have to decide whether to use an article, and which article to use, consider this chart:

Choosing the right article



For example:

I bought a book – *book* is a singular, countable noun; therefore it has to have an article.

Your reader does not know which book you are referring to, therefore it is 'indefinite'.

The book I bought is interesting - *book* is again a singular, countable noun; therefore it has to have an article. In this case, we know which book you are referring to (the book you bought), so it takes a definite article. (More details on the definite article are given below.)

I like the books you gave me – *books* is a plural noun. It is used in a definite sense (we know which books – the books you gave me), so it takes a definite article.

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I like books – *books* is a plural noun. It is used about books generally, not specific books, so it takes no article.

Blood is thicker than water – *blood* and *water* are singular, uncountable nouns. They are used in a general sense, therefore they do not need an article.

I bought two books – you do not need an article, because you already have the word *two*.

I bought some books – you do not need an article, because you already have the word *some*.

How do you know whether you need an article and which article to use?

A single, countable noun must have an article if there is no other number, determiner or possessive (e.g. *two*, *our*, *this*). If the noun is plural, an article may not be necessary. Look first at your noun:

our house – you do not need an article, because you already have the possessive *our*.

this year – you do not need an article, because you already have the determiner *this*.

car – you need an article, because this is a singular countable noun with no determiner already.

trees – you may need an article, depending on whether the noun is definite or not.

For example:

Trees are usually green – no article is needed, because you are talking generally and the noun is not definite, i.e. you are not talking about specific trees.

The trees in the park are green – the article is needed because you have specified which trees you are talking about.

Indefinite article (a/an)

If the noun is singular and countable, and this is the first time you have mentioned it, then you will usually need the indefinite article:

I bought a book – we do not know which book.

There is a bird outside – we do not know anything about the bird.

Measurements and rates also take the indefinite article: *Three times a week*

If the noun starts with a vowel sound, then the article *an* is used: *an ear*, *an uncle*, *an hour*

If the noun starts with a consonant sound, then the article *a* is used: *a school*, *a university*

Definite article (the)

If your reader or listener understands what you are referring to, then you will usually need the definite article:

I bought a book last week. The book is about trees.

(You have just mentioned the book, so you both know which one.)

We went to a wedding yesterday. The bride wore a lovely dress.

(You have not mentioned the bride before, but you both know she is connected to the wedding.)

Some things are taken to be common knowledge in English and therefore take the definite article:

Decades – *He was born in **the 1920s**.*

Currencies – ***The dollar** is getting stronger against **the pound**.*

Superlatives and ordinals – ***The second** book in the series is **the best**.*

Oceans, seas and many rivers – ***The Nile** flows into **the Mediterranean**.*

Plural or 'united' countries – ***The Maldives** are much smaller than **the United States of America**.*

Adjectives used as nouns – ***The poor** will always be a challenge for **the rich** in any country.*

Many organisations – ***The World Health Organization** has a detailed definition of health.*

A scientific categorisation – ***The zebra** is native to Africa.*

A symbol – ***The Merlion** is a symbol of Singapore.*

Unique people, places or things – ***The prime minister** said she would call a conference on changes affecting **the earth's** climate.*

Unique adjectives – **The same** people always take **the only** parking spaces available.

Other word patterns which take 'the':

Specific nouns modified by a relative clause – **The paintings** (which are) in the gallery

Specific nouns followed by 'of'. This is a very common pattern - **The use of** this procedure

Plural nouns preceded by 'of' – e.g. **Some of** the paintings were interesting.

Common error: You cannot write **most of paintings** or **none of paintings**.

It is either **most of the paintings (definite)** or **most paintings (general)**.

Most of the paintings in the exhibition were landscapes.

(definite – we know which specific paintings – they are in the exhibition)

Most paintings nowadays (general – not specific paintings)

No article

We do not need an article if a noun is plural or uncountable and it is not definite.

Women generally live longer than men.

Articles are difficult to use.

Paint is hard to remove.

Exercise

Try this exercise, putting a/an/the in the blanks. If there should be no article, then place a * in the blank. The answers and explanations follow.

Mr Coleman was (1) ___ very fastidious person. He lived three (2) ___ streets away from us, in (3) ___ small house with (4) ___ beautiful garden. Having taken early retirement from his (5) ___ job as (6) ___ button counter, he now had plenty of time to worry, and this he did very successfully. He often spent sleepless nights trying to figure out how he could successfully cook *both* sides of (7) ___ omelette without it breaking, or how he might achieve better access to (8) ___ tins at (9) ___ back of his cupboard. (10) ___ most of his home was exceptionally neat and tidy, but several loose cables behind (11) ___ television set bothered him, and he never quite knew what to do with (12) ___ empty plastic bags.

Then, one day, his life changed, and he began to experience some relief from his anguish. It seemed that other people underwent similar mental trials, for (13) ___ new catalogue appeared on his doorstep. (14) ___ catalogue contained solutions for many of his problems, and for others which had not yet given him any cause for concern. There was (15) ___ set of three egg timers, for example, shaped like (16) ___ chickens and designed to emit (17) ___ clucking sound at (18) ___ end of three, four and five minutes respectively. In this way he could cook (19) ___ eggs to suit each of his friends individually, and then keep them warm with (20) ___ specially designed covers which went with the timer, marked '3', '4' and '5' for identification purposes. And (21) ___ catalogue contained many other wonderful ideas, such as (22) ___ toaster which could be adjusted to produce different degrees of brownness on (23) ___ four slices toasted simultaneously, and (24) ___ photo frame that rotated pictures at (25) ___ touch of (26) ___ invisible button, so that visiting relatives would never be offended by not seeing their pictures on display, unless, of course, they all turned up together – Mr Coleman eventually solved this problem too by ordering four frames.

Answers

Mr Coleman was (1) **a** very fastidious person. He lived three (2) * streets away from us, in (3) **a** small house with (4) **a** beautiful garden. Having taken early retirement from his (5) * job as (6) **a** button counter, he now had plenty of time to worry, and this he did very successfully. He often

spent sleepless nights trying to figure out how he could successfully cook *both* sides of (7) **an** omelette without it breaking, or how he might achieve better access to (8) **the** tins at (9) **the** back of his cupboard. (10) * Most of his home was exceptionally neat and tidy, but several loose cables behind (11) **the** television set bothered him, and he never quite knew what to do with (12) * empty plastic bags.

Then, one day, his life changed, and he began to experience some relief from his anguish. It seemed that other people underwent similar mental trials, for (13) **a** new catalogue appeared on his doorstep. (14) **The** catalogue contained solutions for many of his problems, and for others which had not yet given him any cause for concern. There was (15) **a** set of three egg timers, for example, shaped like (16) * chickens and designed to emit (17) **a** clucking sound at (18) **the** end of three, four and five minutes respectively. In this way he could cook (19) * eggs to suit each of his friends individually, and then keep them warm with (20) **the** specially designed covers which went with the timer, marked '3', '4' and '5' for identification purposes. And (21) **the** catalogue contained many other wonderful ideas, such as (22) **a** toaster which could be adjusted to produce different degrees of brownness on (23) * four slices toasted simultaneously, and (24) **a** photo frame that rotated pictures at (25) **the** touch of (26) **an** invisible button, so that visiting relatives would never be offended by not seeing their pictures on display, unless, of course, they all turned up together – Mr Coleman eventually solved this problem too by ordering four frames.

(Adapted from Haisley, J 2008, *The Good Samaritan*, Ginninderra Press, Adelaide)

Explanations

(1)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(2)	no article	plural, countable noun; a number is used instead ('three streets')
(3)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(4)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(5)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention; someone's job
(6)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(7)	an	singular, countable noun; first mention
(8)	the	plural, countable noun; we know which tins (the tins at the back of his cupboard), so the noun is specific
(9)	the	singular, countable noun; specific noun followed by 'of'
(10)	no article	singular, countable noun; 'most of his home'
(11)	the	singular, countable noun; the writer is drawing you into the story, assuming that you know which television set is talked about, and that Mr Coleman only has one television set
(12)	no article	plural, countable noun; not specific
(13)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(14)	the	singular, countable noun; second mention. You know which catalogue, so it is now specific
(15)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(16)	no article	plural, countable noun; not specific
(17)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(18)	the	singular, countable noun; specific noun followed by 'of'
(19)	no article	plural, countable noun; not specific
(20)	the	singular, countable noun; we know which covers (the covers which went with the timer), so the noun is specific
(21)	the	singular, countable noun; second mention. You know which catalogue, so it is now specific

(22)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(23)	no article	plural, countable noun; a number is used
(24)	a	singular, countable noun; first mention
(25)	the	singular, countable noun; specific noun followed by 'of'
(26)	an	singular, countable noun before a word beginning with a vowel sound; first mention

References

Master, PA 1986, *Science, medicine and technology: English grammar and technical writing*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.

Swales, JM & Feak, CB 1994, *Academic writing for graduate students*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan.