

The Use of Articles with Common Nouns

Choosing the appropriate article can have an important impact on a noun's meaning, and can also affect the readability of your writing. Every noun requires a decision about article usage—whether to use *a/an*, *the*, or *none* (\emptyset). This handout describes how to choose the appropriate article with common nouns.

A **common noun** is a generic noun -- it represents a person, place, or thing, but is not the name of a specific person, place, or thing.

Examples of common nouns: woman, dog, organization

Two easy steps to help determine the correct usage of articles with common nouns:

STEP 1. Determine whether each common noun is **specific** or **unspecific**.

- A **specific noun** is a noun with a previously defined identify. For example, it has already been mentioned in the text, it is unique, or it is followed by modifying information that makes it specific.

Rule: Specific nouns are preceded by *the*.

- An **unspecific noun** is a noun that does not have a unique identity. Additionally, it could be a noun that is being mentioned for the first time in the text.

STEP 2. Determine whether the **unspecific noun** is **countable** or **uncountable**.

[Refer to the Noun Classes Tutorial for more information.]

- A **countable unspecific noun** is a noun that can be classified as **singular** or **plural**.

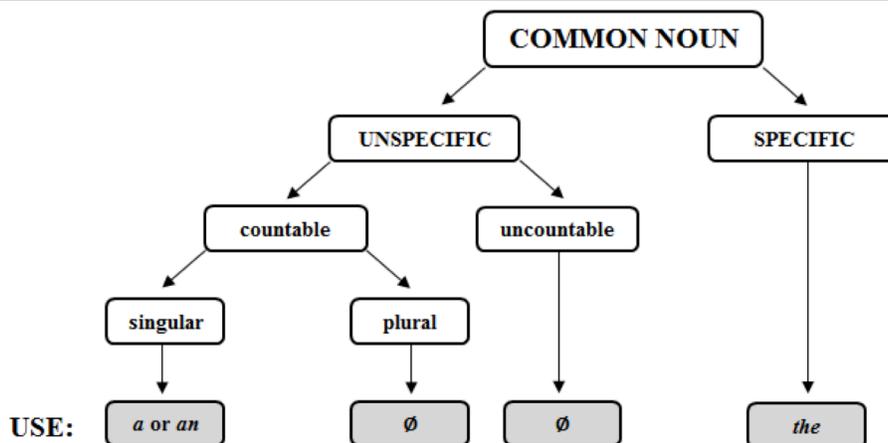
Rule: Unspecific, countable singular nouns are preceded by *a* or *an*.

Rule: Unspecific, countable plural nouns are not preceded by an article.

- An **uncountable unspecific noun** is a noun that can only be classified as **singular**.

Rule: Unspecific, uncountable nouns are not preceded by an article.

Flow chart describing how to choose the correct article



Summary of rules and examples

Rule: Specific nouns are preceded by *the*.

Examples:

*She presented her proposal to her committee. **The proposal** outlined her research.*

***The wine** that I bought is on the table.*

***The sun** rises in the east and sets in the west.*

*It took me three hours to finish **the assigned reading** for class today.*

Rule: Unspecific, countable singular nouns are preceded by *a* or *an*.

Examples:

*I need to buy **a dress** for the fancy party.*

*I swerved my car to avoid hitting **an animal** in the road.*

*He got lost when he made **a wrong turn**.*

Rule: Unspecific, countable plural nouns are not preceded by an article.

Examples:

***Dogs** can be trained to act in **movies**.*

***Tornadoes** can attain wind speeds of more than 300 miles per hour.*

*You should always wear a seatbelt when riding in **automobiles**.*

Rule: Unspecific, uncountable nouns are not preceded by an article.

Examples:

*I gained **knowledge** about the government during my internship at the White House.*

***Success** is often determined by **wealth**.*

Additional examples:

Making **money** is important to many **parents** in their 30s.

She drove to **work**.

Barack Obama was re-elected **president** in 2012.

I enjoy drinking **soda** more than I enjoy drinking **water**.

Practice examples:

Fill in the correct article: *a/an, the, or none (∅)*.

My sister is ___ dentist and my brother is ___ acrobat.

You need ___ passport to travel out of ___ country.

We went to ___ movie yesterday because it got ___ good reviews.

Mercury is ___ closest planet to ___ sun.

Exercise for Practice: Fill in the articles!

Yesterday when we went into ___ courtyard of our building for lunch, we saw ___ owl in ___ tree. We had never seen ___ owl before! This particular owl was pretty big and seemed to be sleepy – he had eaten ___ mouse and was feeling full. Even though there are lots of ___ mice and ___ birds in ___ courtyard, I doubt he will return – we disturbed ___ naptime too much! Still, I hope ___ big, sleepy owl might visit again. If he doesn't, I might go to ___ zoo to see ___ owl up close.

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

<http://www.englishpage.com/articles/index.htm>

<http://writing.umn.edu/sws/assets/pdf/quicktips/articleschart.pdf>

<http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/article.htm>

<http://www.grammarly.com/handbook/grammar/articles/>

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/>

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-grammar/determiners-and-quantifiers/definite-article>

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