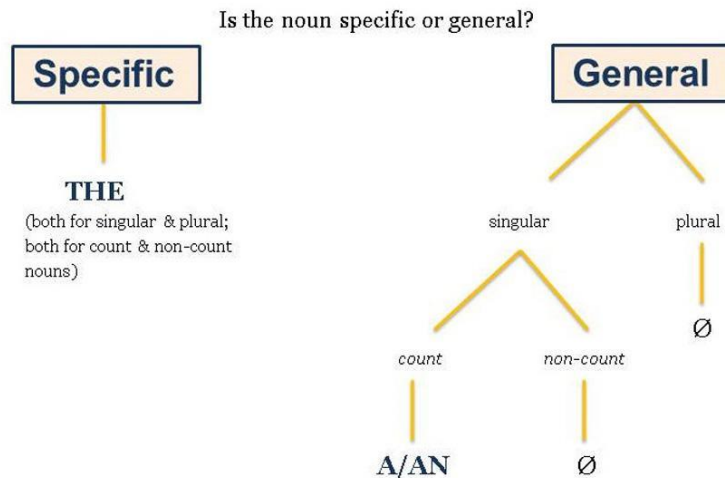


Aggie Grammar Guide: Articles (the, a, an)

Every time you use a noun, rules exist for whether it should be singular or plural AND if it needs an article (**the, a, an**). Pronouns are types of nouns but never take articles. Complicating the issue is the fact that some nouns are countable and some are not countable. Following the question and flowchart below, you can determine which article to use (if any). Note that the symbol \emptyset is used to mean “null” or no article.



What It Means to Be a Specific Noun

Both the writer and reader recognize that the noun has a specific reference (is unique). The necessary information to identify the noun’s reference can come from the text itself, context, or general knowledge. You can test this by asking yourself: **which [noun]?** If the question is illogical, then use **the**.

- Example: Kingston was raised in **the** Chinese immigrant community of Stockton, CA. (The rest of the sentence gives identifiable information about the community that makes it unique. This sentence is possible if there’s only one Chinese immigrant community in Stockton. Using the test above, the question: **which Chinese immigrant community in Stockton, CA?** does not make sense if there is only one.)

Previous mentions in the text can make a noun specific.

- Example: In 1870, the bicycle developed a large front wheel. **The** front wheel, compared to the back wheel, was much bigger in size.

Adjectives can make a noun one-of-a-kind.

- Example: The Wright brothers invented **the** first airplanes.

Use **the** if the noun is part of an **of**-prepositional phrase that shows quantity. Possessives (**my, your, his, her, its, our, their**) function similarly to **the**.

- Example: one of **the** greatest poets; most of **my** friends; some of **the** water
- A *countable* noun in these phrases will always be plural; an *uncountable* noun will always be singular.

What It Means to Be a General Noun

Neither the writer nor the reader identify the noun as something known, unique, or familiar OR the noun's reference is non-specific (general). You can test this by asking yourself: **which [noun]?** If the question is logical, then use **a/an**.

- Example: Kingston was raised in **a** Chinese immigrant community in California. (This sentence is possible if many Chinese immigrant communities exist in California, but the writer is not specific about which one. Using the test above, the question: **which Chinese immigrant community in California?** makes sense because there is more than one)

A general noun indicates membership in a group.

- Example: I am **a** first-year student at UC Davis. (You are a specific student, but part of the general category of first-year students.)

A general noun is used as a definition.

- Example: Davis is **a** city in Yolo County. (Davis is a specific city, but the word "**city**" is used in a general sense because several cities are in Yolo County and Davis is one of them.)

What It Means to Be a Count(able) Noun

You can count the noun. The noun has a singular and plural form (perhaps irregular).

- Example: one bike; two bikes
- Example: a mouse; several mice

Some countable nouns occur only in their plural form.

- Example: clothes, jeans, pajamas

What It Means to Be a Non-count (Uncountable) Noun

You can't count the noun.

- Example: * one rice; * two rices (these phrases are ungrammatical)

These nouns often are in the following categories:

- Liquids/gases: water, air, oil, oxygen, blood, milk, rain
- A substance made up of small particles: sand, sugar, salt, coffee, hair
- Subjects of study: biology, economics, psychology, physics
- Abstract concepts: advice, education, happiness, information, knowledge, success, luck, intelligence

- A collection: research, writing, equipment, furniture, garbage, homework, luggage, jewelry, money, traffic, transportation, evidence

Some Nouns Can Be Either Countable or Uncountable

- Example: paper, change, work, light, difficulty, food, fruit

To describe a concept, use the *uncountable* form; to describe a particular noun, use the *countable* form.

- Example: Change is difficult for many people to get used to. (general concept of change)
- Example: There have been many changes in my life that have been difficult. (many specific changes)

If you're not sure, check a dictionary to see which meaning yours resembles.

What to Do with Proper Nouns

Generally, no article (Ø) is used before singular names of countries, continents, states, lakes, parks, individual mountains, cities, streets, universities, and months/days of the week. It is not always clear, so you can check online to see if **the** is a part of the official name.

- Example: I attend Ø UC Davis.
- Example: Engelstein viewed Ø Russia as unique and distinct, and not in the same unit as the rest of Ø Europe.

UNLESS the proper noun includes an **of**-phrase.

- Example: I attend **the** University of California, Davis.

The is used with oceans, rivers, deserts, bridges, geographic areas, public buildings, and periods/events in history.

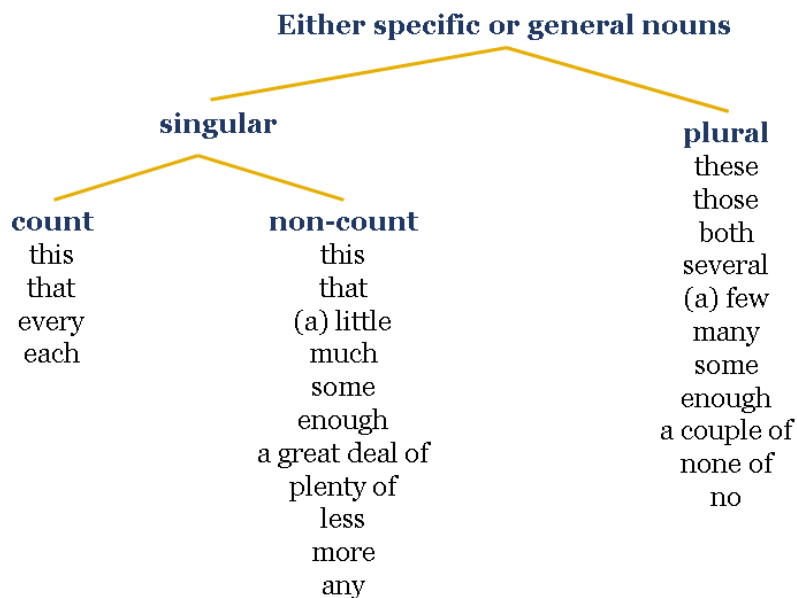
- Example: **The** Memorial Union has good food.
- Example: I have gotten an understanding of how society's beliefs have evolved from **the** 18th to **the** 21st century.

The is used for plural names of lakes, mountain ranges, nationalities, countries, and countries that include the words **United**, **Union**, or **Republic of**.

- Example: I study abroad in the U.S. while my family still lives in Ø China.

Other Options That Function as Articles (Determiners)

This chart categorizes determiners based on whether the noun is (1) specific or general, (2) singular or plural, and (3) count or non-count:



- Example: The climbing team organizes excursions **every** other week. NOT *The climbing team organizes excursions every other weeks.
- Example: He argued that there was too **much** repression. NOT *He argued that there was too many repressions.

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Intermediate Practice

The nouns are bolded in each sentence below. Write the correct article before the noun (or noun phrase). Ø is an option if no article is needed.

Example: I love ____ **sports** very much, but I had ____ **injury**.

Answer: I love Ø **sports** very much, but I had an **injury**.

- 1) I always thought that ____ **America** would have ____ **lot** of ____ **Caucasians**.
- 2) ____ **stress** has ____ great **impact** on ____ **students'** academic performance.
- 3) ____ successful **climber** is ____ wise **judge** of ____ physical **ability** and ____ good **decision maker**.
- 4) In addition, ____ **media** do not anticipate ____ **dangers** and ____ **risks**.
- 5) In almost every Chinese school, rather than teaching students how to actually speak in English, educators teach students how to deal with English exams. Actually, ____ **issue** has become ____ major **problem** among ____ Chinese **students** in ____ American **colleges**.
- 6) ____ **author** describes how ____ **Google** will have ____ hard **time** to get into ____ automotive **industry**.
- 7) How does ____ electric **motor** work in ____ **hybrid car**?

Advanced Practice

Each of the following sentences has at least two nouns. First, read each sentence and list all the nouns (include proper nouns but not pronouns). Second, decide if the relationship between each noun and its article is correct and then revise the sentence to correct any article errors. When you make corrections, try adding an article, removing an article, changing an article, or making the noun singular or plural. For each sentence, at least one relationship will be correct and at least one will be incorrect.

Example: *I ate plate of eggs along with some toasts.*

Nouns: *plate, eggs, toasts*

Revision: *I ate **a** plate of eggs along with some **toast**.*

- 1) This was my first time to read the long chapter about the space lives.
 - A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.
- 2) In the article, author gave an example about Facebook.
 - A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.
- 3) With their amazing charisma, the United Kingdom and France are the representative countries of the Europe.
 - A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.
- 4) Language is the one of the most important factor that I will consider.
 - A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.
- 5) The first reason why the mobile phones are the most beneficial invention in the last 100 years is that mobile phones can strengthen people's relationship.
 - A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.

- 6) For example, the author mentioned that by 2080 only six cities will be able to hold Winter Olympics because of the global warming.
- A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.
- 7) I was amazed by what majority of men expected women to be in the 1700s.
- A. List the nouns:
 - B. Revise the sentence to fix any article errors.

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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

- 1) I always thought that **Ø** America would have **a** lot of **Ø** Caucasians.
- 2) **Ø** Stress has **a** great impact on **Ø/the** students' academic performance.
(“Ø” would refer to general, unspecified students. “The” would refer to specific students who have been identified in a prior sentence.)
- 3) **A/The** successful climber is **a** wise judge of **Ø** physical ability and **a** good decision maker.
(“A” would refer to any climber, but no one climber in particular. “The” is a more formal option and would refer to a typical climber as representative of the whole class of climbers.)
- 4) In addition, **the** media do not anticipate **Ø/the** dangers and **Ø/the** risks.
(“Ø” would refer to general, unspecified dangers and risks. “The” would refer to specific dangers and risks that have been identified from the context. For the specific meaning, “the” can occur just before the first noun or before both nouns.)
- 5) In almost every Chinese school, rather than teaching students how to actually speak in English, educators teach students how to deal with English exams. Actually, **the** issue has become **a/the** major problem among **Ø/the** Chinese students in **Ø/the** American colleges.
(Use “the” if there is only one problem, one specific group of Chinese students, and an emphasis on American colleges over others.)
- 6) **An/The** author describes how **Ø** Google will have **a** hard time to get into **the** automotive industry. (“An” would be used if the author's name has not yet been mentioned; “the” would be used to refer to a specific, named author.)
- 7) How does **an/the** electric motor work in **a/the** hybrid car?
(“An” would refer to a general motor/hybrid car, not one in particular. “The” would refer to a typical electric motor/hybrid car as representative of the whole class of electric motors/hybrid cars.)

Advanced Practice

- 1) This was my first time to read the long chapter about the space lives.
 - A. time, chapter, lives
 - B. This was my first time to read **a** long chapter about **space lives**.
- 2) In the article, author gave an example about Facebook.
 - A. article, author, example, Facebook
 - B. In the article, **the** author gave an example about Facebook.
- 3) With their amazing charisma, the United Kingdom and France are the representative countries of the Europe.
 - A. charisma, United Kingdom, France, countries, Europe
 - B. With their amazing charisma, the United Kingdom and France are **the/Ø** representative countries of **Europe**.
("The" would be used if the United Kingdom and France are the only two representative countries of Europe. No article [Ø] would imply that other representative countries of Europe exist besides these two.)
- 4) Language is the one of the most important factor that I will consider.
 - A. language, one, factors
 - B. Language is one of the most important **factors** that I will consider
- 5) The first reason why the mobile phones are the most beneficial invention in the last 100 years is that mobile phones can strengthen people's relationship.
 - A. reason, mobile phones, invention, years, mobile phones, relationship
 - B. The first reason why **mobile phones** are the most beneficial invention in the last 100 years is that mobile phones can strengthen people's **relationships**.
- 6) For example, the author mentioned that by 2080 only six cities will be able to hold Winter Olympics because of the global warming.
 - A. example, author, 2080, cities, Winter Olympics, global warming
 - B. For example, the author mentioned that by 2080 only six cities will be able to hold **the** Winter Olympics because of **global warming**.
- 7) I was amazed by what majority of men expected women to be in the 1700s.
 - A. majority, men, women, 1700s
 - B. I was amazed by what **the** majority of men expected women to be in the 1700s.