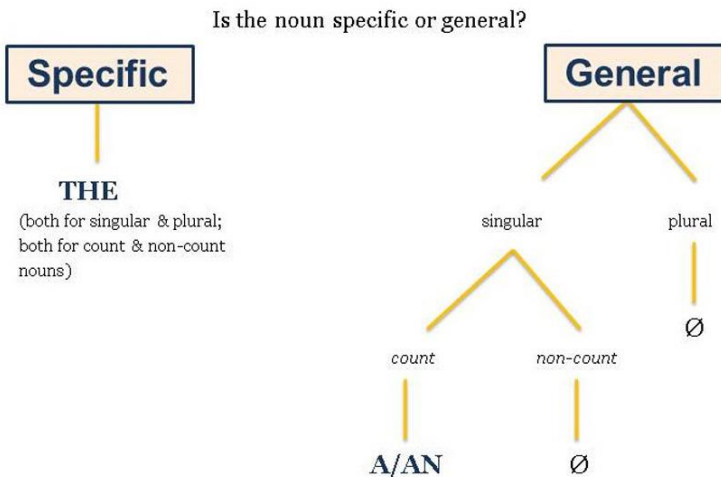


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Aggie Grammar Guide: Articles (the, a, an)

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**). 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.

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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.

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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.

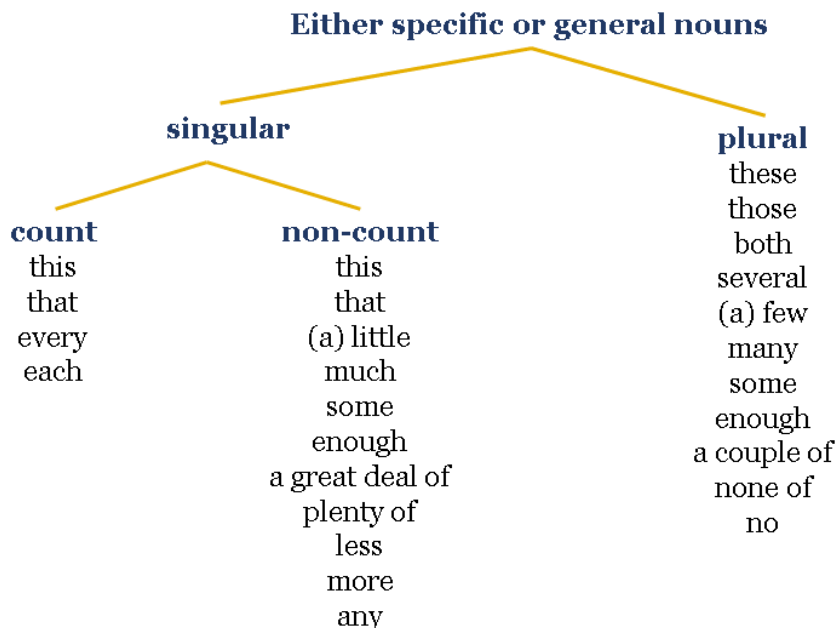
- Example: **The** Memorial Union has good food.
- Example: I have gotten an understanding of how society's beliefs have evolved from **the** 18th to **the** 21st century.

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.