**Definite and Indefinite Articles**

**Articles with Singular Countable Nouns**

Either a definite (the) or an indefinite (a, an) article is used with a singular countable noun (a noun representing a person or thing that can be counted as a single item). You can write either *a pencil* or *the pencil*, *an eraser*or*the eraser*, *a student*or*the student*, *an instructor*or *the instructor*.

**Sometimes the indefinite article a or an has approximately the same meaning as the number “one.”**

I’ll be in the library for an hour or two.  
(Or: I’ll be there for one or two hours.)

More often *a*or *an*has the meaning of “one” in the sense of a single unit or item. In situations of this kind, “one” cannot be substituted for the indefinite article without changing the meaning. Compare the following examples:

The lifeguard saved one swimmer’s life. (But the other swimmer drowned.)  
I drank a cup of coffee this morning.  
I drank one cup of coffee this morning, but I usually drink two.

**The definite article *the*is used mainly to single out a specific or particular person or thing. Before a singular countable noun,*the* has much the same meaning as the demonstrative *that*, although *that* is more emphatic in pointing something out. Compare the following examples:**

Did you buy the book?  
Did you buy that book?

When using the definite article in this way, the speaker may further identify the book by adding a qualifying word, phrase, or clause.

Did you buy the chemistry book?  
Did you buy the book recommended by the instructor?

**Whether a definite or an indefinite article is placed before a single countable noun is further illustrated in the following sentences:**

She rented a bicycle. (A single item)  
She rented the bicycle. (A specific bicycle, such as the Italian bicycle)

Sometimes a writer begins with an indefinite article and then shifts to a definite article once the identity of the person or thing has been established.

A package arrived from Alicia. We put the package on the dining room table.

**Articles with Plural Countable Nouns**

Since a plural countable noun refers to more than one person or thing, the definite article can be used with it but the indefinite article cannot. You would write either *pencils*or*the pencils*, *students* or *the students*, and so forth.

**Even though indefinite articles are not used with plural nouns, such indefinite adjectives as *few, a few, fewer, some, any, several,*and *many* may be used to indicate an indefinite number.**

He put ice cubes in the glass.  
(Or: He put some ice cubes in the glass.)

There aren’t any magazines on the desk.  
I don’t see many people at the box office.  
We brought a few apples on the picnic.

**An article is not used before a plural noun that refers to people or things as a group or in general.**

Newspaper critics can often determine the fate of New York plays.  
They like to collect stamps.

**With plural countable nouns, as with single countable nouns, *the* singles out or identifies a specific or particular person or thing. Before a plural countable noun, *the*has much the same meaning as the demonstrative*those*, although *those* is more emphatic. As with singular countable nouns, a qualifying word, phrase, or clause is often used to further identify the persons or objects.**

I shopped for the cooking utensils.  
He used the ice cubes we brought for the party.

**Articles with Uncountable Nouns**

The indefinite article is not used with an uncountable noun (a noun representing something that cannot be counted as a single unit or item). The definite article can be used to limit or restrict uncountable nouns. You would write *water*or*the water*, *strength* or *the strength*, *sound* or *the sound*.

Laughter is a tonic. (Uncountable)  
The laughter of the audience pleased the actress. (Limited by a definite article.)

The following types of nouns are generally considered uncountable:

**Mass nouns, such as coffee, sugar, tea, water, oil, air, ink, oxygen**

They will serve either coffee or tea.  
He checked the car’s oil, water, and gasoline and filled the tires with air.

Indefinite adjectives may be used with mass nouns to indicate indefinite quantity.

She spilled some sand on the rug.  
There isn’t any pepper in the shaker.  
It takes much energy to jog for five miles.

Countable units of measure may be used with mass nouns to indicate definite amounts. Compare the following examples:

Buy a bottle of milk.  
The recipe calls for a cup of sugar.  
He drank a glass of orange juice.

**Abstract nouns, such as peace, truth, liberty, justice, beauty, honesty**

Darkness comes about 6 o'clock every night.  
Wisdom is the goal of many scholars.  
She has shown a lot of patience with her daughter.

**Names of general areas of subject matter, such as music, economics, history, English, art, science**

His courses included English, biology, mathematics, and political science.

**Names of sports or recreational activities, such as football, baseball, tennis, golf, dance, chess, singing**

She is playing tennis.  
He plays hockey well.

The name of a sport or recreational activity that functions as a modifier may be preceded by an article:

He is a valuable hockey player.

**Summary of Articles with Countable and Uncountable Nouns**

Some nouns normally considered uncountable may also function as countable nouns, depending on whether they are being used in an abstract or a more specific sense.

A favorite North African drink is mint tea. (A mass noun)

The teas served in the Orient are varied. (A plural countable noun meaning “the types of tea”)  
Wisdom is strength. (Abstract nouns)  
She doubted the wisdom of his decision. (A singular countable noun meaning “act of deciding”)  
The strengths of your paper are clear. (A plural countable noun meaning “good points”)  
Science is a subject that interests many people. (A general area of subject matter)  
Would you call astrology a science? (A countable noun meaning “a branch of science”)

**The following group of nouns is used either as countable or uncountable, depending on the meaning to be expressed: breakfast, lunch, dinner, supper, town. Compare the following examples:**

Mrs. Allen drove to town this afternoon.  
The town has many points of historical interest.

**A SINGULAR COUNTABLE NOUN ALWAYS TAKES AN ARTICLE:**

If a single unit or item--A or AN If specific or particular—THE

He read an article about fishing. He read the article in Sports Illustrated  
You must reserve a ticket. Did you receive the ticket I mailed you?  
Did you buy a dress? I like the blue dress better than the red one.

**A PLURAL COUNTABLE NOUN DOES NOT TAKE AN ARTICLE**

**AN UNCOUNTABLE NOUN (MASS, ABSTRACT) SOMETIMES TAKES AN ARTICLE**

If general--(no article) If specific or particular--THE

Work can be very therapeutic. I appreciated the work you did.  
Copper is mined in Arizona. The copper in this pan has tarnished.  
Kindness is a desirable trait. Thank you for the kindness you have shown me.

**Articles with Proper Names**

By proper name, we mean the name of a person or the name of a particular place or thing. As with common nouns, *the*before a proper name singles out or identifies that which is specific or particular. Generally speaking, no article is required before a proper name when the name is sufficient in itself to establish identification. *The* would be used only in a situation in which the identification was not clearly established. Compare the following examples:

I met George Anderson last week.  
The George Anderson whom I knew in college telephoned yesterday.

*The* is necessary when a person is referred to by a title composed of what would ordinarily be considered a common noun plus an identifying phrase.

The Emperor of Japan rarely travels abroad.  
The Secretary of State flew to Riyadh for the meeting.

Since the use of articles with proper names involves many exceptions, the following list may be helpful:

**TYPES OF NAME WITHOUT ARTICLE WITH THE**

**Geographic** Eastern Europe, the North Pole  
Areas North Africa, the South Pole  
Southern California

**Continents** Africa, North America

**Countries** Colombia, the Republic of  
Thailand, Canada Colombia, the  
Russia, England, Kingdom of Thailand,  
Lebanon the Dominion of Canada, the Soviet Union, the United States (of America)

**States** Oklahoma, the State of  
Counties, Cook County, Oklahoma, the  
Provinces, Quebec, Boston, Province of Quebec,  
Cities Salt Lake City the City of Boston, The Hague

**Empires** the Ottoman Empire,  
Dynasties, etc. the Ming Dynasty,  
the British Commonwealth of Nations

**Oceans** Seas the Atlantic Ocean,  
Rivers, Canals, the Red Sea, the  
Deserts, and Forests Tigris River, the Suez Canal,  
the Sahara Desert, the Black Forest

**Islands** Lakes -Singular: Wake -Plural: the Canary  
and Mountains Island, Lake Geneva, Islands, the Great Lakes, the  
Mount Whitney Andes Mountains

**Parks** Central Park, Hyde Park, Kruger Park

**Streets** Maple Street, Fifth Avenue,  
Elderberry Road, Sunset Boulevard

**Universities** Yale University, the University of Maryland,

**Colleges** New York University, the College of Holy Names,  
Schools, Wellesley College, the State College of  
Institutes San Francisco State Washington College

**Museums** The Metropolitan Museum,  
Libraries the Louvre, the Library of  
Congress, the Huntington Library

**Buildings** Independence Hall, the Empire State Building,  
Carnegie Hall, Wheeler the Medical-Dental  
Auditorium Building, the Civic Auditorium

**Businesses** Penney’s, Joe’s Cafe, the J.C. Penney Company,  
(stores, restaurants, Mary’s Beauty Shop, the All-Nite Grocery Store, firms, etc.) Hotel Ambassador the Feather Mattress  
Company, the Fox Theatre, the Statler Hotel

**Holidays** Christmas, the Fourth (4th) of July, Thanksgiving, New Year’s Day, Washington’s Birthday

**Charters**, the United Nations Charter,  
Clubs, the Rotary Club, the Foreign Committees, Relations Committee (of the Doctrines, etc. Senate), the Monroe Doctrine

**Whether or not an article is used with the names of nationalities depends on the way the name is used.**

**When the name of a nationality functions as a noun, the principles governing the use of articles with countable nouns apply.**

There is a Brazilian in the store.  
He is the Russian I met recently.

**In referring to an entire group of people, no article is required if the name has a plural form; *the* may be used to single out one group from another.**

Norwegians are fond of winter sports.  
Do the Americans eat as much ice cream as the Italians?

***The* is ordinarily used if the name does not have a plural form.**

The British are known for their civilized ritual of high tea.  
The French have made their mark in the fashion world.

**When the name of a nationality functions as an adjective complement, no article is used.**

The Mitsubishis are Japanese.  
Hans is German.