

## Definite and Indefinite Articles

UWF Writing Lab

### 1. 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.

- a. 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 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.

- b. 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:

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?

- c. 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.

## 2. 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.

- a. 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.

- b. 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.

- c. 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.

## 3. 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:

- a. 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:

Buy a bottle of milk.

The recipe calls for a cup of sugar.

He drank a glass of orange juice.

- b. 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.

- c. Names of general areas of subject matter, such as music, economics, history, English, art, science.

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

- d. 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.

#### 4. 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:

Mrs. Allen drove to town this afternoon.

The town has many points of historical interest.

The following chart summarizes the use of articles with countable and uncountable nouns:

#### 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.

### 5. 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

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 <u>THE</u>
a. Geographic Areas	Eastern Europe, North Africa, Southern California	the North Pole the South Pole
b. Continents	Africa, North America	
c. Countries	Colombia, Thailand, Canada Russia, England, Lebanon	the Republic of Colombia, the Kingdom of Thailand, the Dominion of Canada, the Soviet Union, the United States (of America) <sup>1</sup>
d. States, Counties, Provinces, Cities	Oklahoma, Cook County, Quebec, Boston, Salt Lake City	the State of Oklahoma, the Province of Quebec, the City of Boston, The Hague
e. Empires, Dynasties, etc.		the Ottoman Empire, the Ming Dynasty, the British Commonwealth of Nations
f. Oceans, Seas		the Atlantic Ocean, <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We do not usually refer to countries, states, and so forth by their official titles; that is, we refer to France, rather than the Republic of France; however, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union are commonly used titles.

Rivers, Canals, Deserts, and Forests		the Red Sea, the Tigris River, the Suez Canal, the Sahara Desert, the Black Forest
g. Islands, Lakes and Mountains	-Singular: Wake Island, Lake Geneva, Mount Whitney	-Plural: the Canary Islands, the Great Lakes, the Andes Mountains
h. Parks	Central Park, Hyde Park Kruger Park	
i. Streets	Maple Street, Fifth Avenue, Elderberry Road, Sunset Boulevard	
j. Universities, Colleges, Schools, Institutes	Yale University, New York University, Wellesley College, San Francisco State College	the University of Maryland, the College of Holy Names, the State College of Washington
k. Museums, Libraries		The Metropolitan Museum, the Louvre, the Library of Congress, the Huntington Library
l. Buildings	Independence Hall, Carnegie Hall, Wheeler Auditorium	the Empire State Building, the Medical-Dental Building, the Civic Auditorium
m. Businesses (stores, restaurants, firms, etc.)	Penney's, Joe's Cafe, Mary's Beauty Shop, Hotel Ambassador	the J.C. Penney Company, the All-Nite Grocery Store, the Feather Mattress Company, the Fox Theatre, the Statler Hotel
n. Holidays	Christmas, Thanksgiving,	the Fourth (4th) of July

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<sup>2</sup>The word "ocean" is often omitted, and the words "sea," "river," and "desert" are often omitted when the place is well known.

The Panama Canal connects the Atlantic and the Pacific.  
The Nile flows into the Mediterranean.

New Year's Day,  
Washington's Birthday

o. Charters,  
Clubs,  
Committees,  
Doctrines, etc.

the United Nations Charter,  
the Rotary Club, the Foreign  
Relations Committee (of the  
Senate), the Monroe  
Doctrine

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

- a. 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.

- b. 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?

- c. 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.

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

The Mitsubishis are Japanese.  
Hans is German.