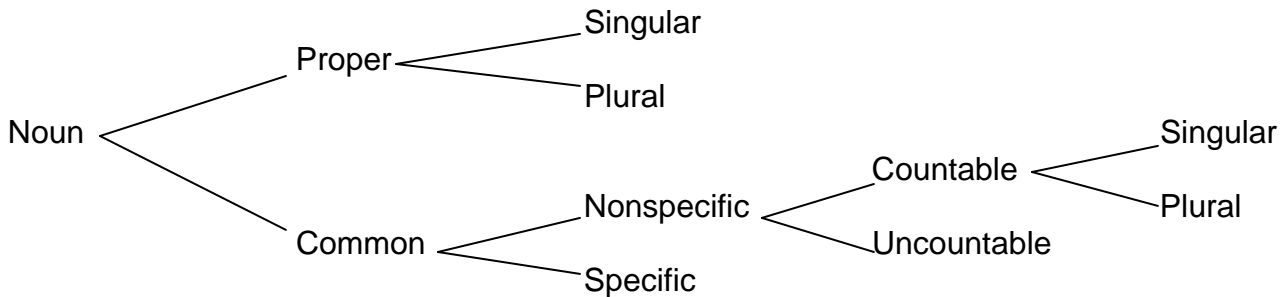


# ARTICLES

Unlike many languages, English requires a **determiner** in front of many nouns. The most common kind of determiner is called an **article**, which is one of three specific words: **a**, **an**, or **the**. This handout explains which nouns need a determiner and which do not.

There are two kinds of nouns: **proper** and **common**. Common nouns can be **specific** or **nonspecific, countable** or **uncountable**.



## Proper Nouns

Proper nouns name specific people, places, or things. They always begin with capital letters.

The **Chans**, who are driving across **Florida**, went to **Orlando** to visit the **Johnsons**.

Proper nouns can be **singular** (Florida, Orlando) or **plural** (Chans, Johnsons). Plural proper nouns often require the article **the**. Singular proper nouns do not usually require an article or any kind of determiner, although an exception is made for some vast areas: the Pacific Ocean, the Sahara desert.

## Common Nouns

Common nouns name nonspecific objects or concepts and do not begin with capital letters.

Those two dogs are going to the **park** to meet their **friends** and watch some **people**.

**Common nouns usually do require one or more determiners.** The determiners used with common nouns include one or more of the following:

articles	a, an, the
demonstrative adjectives	this, that, these, those
possessive adjectives	my, your, his, hers, ours, its, their
possessive nouns	Abdul's, the students'...
quantity words	some, many, a few, a lot, each...
numbers	one, two, ten...

Look again at the example of common nouns above. Notice the determiners used: **those two** dogs, **the** park, **their** friends, and **some** people.

Use the article **a** before words beginning with a consonant sound when the word is spoken out loud (**a class, a hotdog, a uniform**). Use the article **an** before words beginning with a vowel sound when the word is spoken out loud (**an expert, an honor, an understanding**).

## Specific and Nonspecific Nouns

When a noun refers to one specific thing that the reader and writer are both already familiar with, it's used with the article **the**. To determine if a noun is being used specifically, look at its context.

I bought a dog on Monday and **the dog** ran away on Tuesday.

Here, "the dog" is a specific reference, referring to the dog that I bought on Monday. A specific reference is when the writer and reader agree that a noun is somehow unique or familiar.

When a noun does not refer to a specific thing that the reader and writer are both already familiar with, it's used with the article **a** or **an**.

I ran over a dog.

In the example, "a dog" is a nonspecific reference. Was it your dog? Was it the dog I bought on Monday? What color was it? You are not expected to know those answers. With a nonspecific reference, the writer and reader agree it could be any dog.

## Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Many common nouns are **countable** nouns. In the singular, they are often used with the articles **a** and **an**, which express the idea of one (1) individual unit. Countable nouns refer to things that have a distinct form and can be counted individually, so their names have a plural form. The plural form may be irregular; when in doubt, check your dictionary.

one book	a book	two books
one child	a child	two children
one example	an example	two examples
one goose	a goose	two geese
one analysis	an analysis	two analyses

A countable noun in the singular almost never stands alone; it requires an article or some other determiner.

- (wrong):** He has **gun** in pocket.
- (right):** He has **a gun** in his pocket.
- (right):** He has **the gun** in his pocket.
- (right):** He has **my gun** in his pocket.

Since a plural countable noun refers to more than one person or thing, the definite article **the** can be used but the indefinite article **a** or **an** cannot. **The** is not used before a plural noun that refers to persons or things in general, but it can be used before a plural noun that describes specific persons or things.

- (wrong):** A doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.
- (right):** Doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.
  
- (wrong):** The doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.
- (right):** Doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.

**(wrong):** Doctors at Mercy Medical Center could not diagnose my illness.  
**(right):** The doctors at Mercy Medical Center could not diagnose my illness.

Some nouns can be countable or not, depending on how they are used.

**Iron** (Fe, a chemical element) is not countable.  
**An iron** (the appliance you press your clothes with) is countable. Therefore,

Many things are still made of **iron** in the twenty-first century, but **an iron** is not one of them.

Other nouns refer to things that cannot be counted individually at all:

advertising	equipment	honor	machinery
advice	evidence	information	progress
attendance	furniture	insurance	satisfaction
beauty	garbage	intelligence	scenery
electricity	homework	knowledge news	traffic

These uncountable common nouns have no singular or plural form. They never take **a** or **an** because they cannot be counted individually; they often take no article at all. However, if you want to limit the quantity you're referring to, you can use a quantity word like "some" or much."

**(wrong):** Ms. Sanchez gave me **a knowledge**, and I responded with **an enthusiasm**.  
**(wrong):** Ms. Sanchez gave me **knowledges**, and I responded with **enthusiasms**.  
**(right):** Ms. Sanchez gave me **knowledge**, and I responded with **enthusiasm**.  
**(wrong):** Ms. Sanchez gave me **knowledges**, and I responded with **enthusiasms**.  
**(right):** Ms. Sanchez gave me **some knowledge** (less than total knowledge) of the language, and I responded with **enthusiasm**.

### How to Decide What Article to Use with a Noun—If Any

Once you have determined if a noun is proper or common, countable or uncountable, specific or nonspecific, you can apply some general rules. But be careful! **These rules are only general and you will come across exceptions.** Some common exceptions are listed at the end of this handout.

Is it a proper noun?

- I. If YES, it is a proper noun, then is it singular?
  - A. YES, it is singular. Most singular proper nouns take no article at all.

**Yoko went to Orlando on Friday to see Mickey Mouse.**

- B. NO, it is plural. Most plural proper nouns take **the**.

**The Olsens and the Simons are going to the Great Lakes.**

II. If NO, it is a common noun, then is it referring to something very specific that the reader is already aware of?

A. YES, it is specific. Most specific common nouns take **the**.

Please pass **the sugar**.

B. NO, it's not specific or previously identified.

1. Is the common noun countable?

a. NO, it is not countable. If you are making a generalization, use no article; if you are limiting a generalization, use a quantity word like *some* or *little*.

**Rice** tends to burn if not watched carefully.  
**Some rice**, like basmati, can be hard to find.

b. YES, it is countable. Is it singular?

i. YES, it is singular. Use **a** or **an**.

**A doctor** can prescribe this medicine for you.  
**An accident** can have many causes.

ii. NO, it is plural. Use no article or use a plural quantity word like *many* or *few*.

**Bicycles** are inexpensive ways to travel.  
**Some classes** require internet access.

Common Exceptions

Unique objects:	the earth, the sun, the moon, <b>but</b> Earth, Mars
Places:	the United States, the Sahara, the Hague, the Statue of Liberty
Bodies of water:	the Pacific, the Nile, the Mediterranean, the Great Lakes, <b>but</b> Lake Superior
Diseases and ailments:	a cold, a headache, the flu, <b>but</b> pneumonia, cancer
Destination:	to go to the store, to go to the post office, to go to the bank, <b>but</b> to go to school, to go to church, to go to bed, to go home
Locations:	at home, in bed, in school, in college, <b>but</b> at the University
Expressions of time:	in the morning, all the time, most of the time, since the 1940's, the past 5 years, <b>but</b> at night, sometimes, in time, on time

## Practice I

In the paragraphs below, write in the articles **a**, **an**, or **the** wherever they should be inserted.

1. Americans of all ages are using drugs in greater variety and in greater numbers than ever before. Almost every kind of prescription drug that has some sort of effect on mood is being misused at this time.

It seems today that if chemical can be abused, it will be abused. And, since use of all sorts of drugs in next ten years is expected to increase manyfold, we have no reason to believe that problem of drug abuse will soon disappear.

When we explore causes of drug abuse, we should remember that many of today's drugs are thousands of years old. Throughout recorded history man has used pleasure-giving and pain-killing substances for comfort and protection against hardships of life.

What is new is explosion of experimentation with drugs among our young people. Concurrent with drug use is lack of interest shown by segment of youth in such traditional activities as schooling and jobs.

2. Automotive paint is such common substance that motoring public is often unaware that small chips can be very valuable clues in hit-and-run investigations.

Paint transfer occurs in many collisions involving vehicles. At scene of hit-and-run accident, for example, police personnel often collect paint samples from struck vehicle, from related debris, or from clothing of struck pedestrian, either in smear form or as actual chips.

Criminologists are then asked to examine paint samples and to classify or individualize them. Classification helps to determine probable make, model, and year of vehicle involved and is useful in early stages of investigation. Individualization is more specific characterization, establishing that paint came from particular vehicle. Simplest methods of paint characterization involve microscopic examination of color, surface texture, surface markings and layer structure, and matching of broken edges.

3. Air conditioner has become permanent fixture in many American homes, and more and more people are buying one every year. More than six million units were sold in 1970. Amount of primary energy devoted to residential air conditioning increased at average growth rate of 15.5 percent per year between 1960 and 1968, and much of increase in total electrical residential consumption between 1960 and 1970 was due to air conditioning. Estimated 30 percent of national use of electricity in summer months consists of air conditioning for homes and apartments. Size and variety of home air conditioning equipment vary greatly, ranging from manually controlled window unit to complex system that gives independent temperature and humidity control to every room in house.

One of most important differences among many models of air conditioners on market today is that some are more energy-efficient than others. It would be wise--not only from energy conservation standpoint but from monetary one--for consumers to start making choices based on efficiency criterion. While providing same amount of cooling, less efficient machine can consume 2-6 times as much electricity used as most efficient one.

## Practice II

Fill in the blanks with **the** or **a/an**. If no article is required, leave the space blank.

1. Student: How did I do on \_\_\_test?  
Teacher: Well, actually you didn't do very well. Don't you have \_\_\_tutor?  
Student: Yes. \_\_\_Mary has been tutoring me for \_\_\_two weeks now. It's been difficult to meet, though, because I don't have \_\_\_car. \_\_\_Mary does have \_\_\_small Toyota, but it often breaks down.
2. Son: Dad, can I have\_\_\_car tonight? I want to take Kim to\_\_\_movie.  
Dad: That depends. Don't you have\_\_\_paper to write?  
Son: Yes, but it's almost done, and, besides, \_\_\_friend told me that Ms. Miller postponed it to \_\_\_next Friday.  
Dad: Well, okay. But be back by 12:30. We'll be watching\_\_\_Conan O'Brian Show.  
Son: Thanks, Dad. By the way, could I go buy\_\_\_new shirt for \_\_\_last school dance next week?
3. \_\_\_wine that I bought \_\_\_other day at \_\_\_store around \_\_\_corner would probably taste good with cheese. I bought \_\_\_Swiss cheese yesterday along with \_\_\_bottle of wine. But I am not certain if \_\_\_Swiss cheese tastes good with \_\_\_burgundy, which is\_\_\_type which I bought. I will ask my friend about matter; she knows\_\_\_great deal about \_\_\_wines and cheeses.
4. Whenever I see\_\_\_stray dog in\_\_\_street, I feel sorry for\_\_\_poor animal. I think it should have\_\_\_home and children to play with, or\_\_\_adult to take care of it.
5. It was\_\_\_beautiful day. \_\_\_sky was\_\_\_unusual shade of blue. \_\_\_grass was bright green, and \_\_\_flowers were just starting to bloom. I saw\_\_\_next-door neighbor children playing in\_\_\_yard next to mine. I could not tell if they were playing\_\_\_particular game, but they certainly were enjoying\_\_\_day and\_\_\_weather.
6. \_\_\_good way to learn how to spell\_\_\_word is to imagine that you can see\_\_\_word written in your mind. If you have trouble with spelling\_\_\_words, you may need to imagine \_\_\_word for\_\_\_long time. Then, you should try to write\_\_\_word on\_\_\_piece of\_\_\_paper. Compare\_\_\_word you have written with \_\_\_word you studied. If \_\_\_two words are \_\_\_same, then you know that you have learned\_\_\_new word.