

Articles *A, An, The*

The articles *a*, *an*, and *the* are known as noun markers because they mark or signal a noun.

Noun markers include

- The articles *a*, *an*, and *the*;
- Possessive nouns, such as *Elena's*;
- Possessive pronouns/adjectives, such as *my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our*, *their*;
- Demonstrative pronouns/adjectives, such as *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*;
- Quantifiers, such as *all*, *any*, *each*, etc.; numbers. (See note at end.)

In the English language, nouns that can be counted, **when singular**, always require a noun marker.

- ➡ A **counting noun** is something you can count. Example: flowers, books, eggs, teachers, movies, meals, etc.
- ➡ A **mass noun** (non-counting noun) cannot be counted. Example: water, milk, heat, kindness, etc.

Rule #1: When a **singular noun** is mentioned for the **first time** with no other noun marker, use *a* (or *an*).

- I saw **a** dog wandering on the street.
 - (Use **a** as noun marker as the dog is mentioned for the first time.)
- Later, **the** dog was at my neighbor's house.
 - The specific dog referred to earlier.
- I saw **an** elephant at the zoo.
 - (Use **an** since elephant begins with a vowel and the first time mentioned.)
- I wonder if there is **an** elevator at the end of the hall.
 - (Use **an** because the noun begins with a vowel.)
- **One** person was standing.
 - (*One* is already marking the noun, so no other noun marker is needed.)
- I stubbed **my** toe on **a** rock.
 - (*My* is already marking the noun, so no other noun marker is needed.)

Rule #2: Use *the* when talking about **specific people or things**, for both singular and plural nouns.

- **The** dog probably belongs to our neighbor.
- **The** dogs were very hungry.
 - (*The* does not change when plural.)
- **The** drivers were all honking **their** horns.
 - (*Their* marks the noun *horns*.)

Rule #3: When speaking generally about **plural counting nouns or mass nouns**, noun markers are not required.

- **A** woman came to my door yesterday. **The** woman was collecting *donations* for the local food bank.
 - (No noun marker is needed before *donations* because it is plural and used in a general sense.)
- My friend was carrying books, pencils, and **an** umbrella.
 - (*Books* and *pencils* are plural counting nouns in a general sense and do not require noun markers. *Umbrella* is singular and requires a noun marker.
- My desk is covered with dust.
 - (*Dust* is a mass noun being used in a general sense, so no noun marker is needed.)
- **The** dust must have blown in from the nearby construction.
 - (In this sentence, *dust* is specific.)
- I found flowers on my desk this morning.
 - (No noun marker is needed because *flowers* is being used in a general sense)
- The third floor is the hottest because *heat* rises.
 - (*Heat* is a mass noun in a general sense, so no noun marker is needed.)

Rule #4: Use a noun marker to change the **meaning** of a sentence by making the noun being referred to **specific**.

- Bad behavior makes **teachers** angry.
 - (*Teachers* is used in a general sense.)
- Bad behavior makes **the** teachers angry.
 - (A specific group of teachers)

Hacker, Diana, and Nancy Sommers. *A Writer's Reference with Exercises and Writing about Literature*, 8th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 289-297.

For more information: Sperling, Dave. *Dave's ESL Café*. Dave Sperling, 2016, www.eslcafe.com.