Tips for English Language Learners: Articles A, An, The

A, an, and the are known as noun markers because they mark or signal a noun. In the English language, nouns that can be counted, when singular, always require a noun marker.

Remember, 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.

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; and
- Demonstrative pronouns/adjectives, such as this, that, these, those;
- Quantifiers, such as all, any, each, etc.; numbers. (See note at end.)

Rule #1: If a singular noun is mentioned for the first time and no other noun marker exists, use a (an). For example,
- I saw a dog wandering on the street. (Use a as noun marker because the dog is mentioned for the first time.)
- I wonder if there is an elevator at the end of the hall. (Same as above, but use an because the noun being marked begins with a vowel.)
- One person was standing. (One is already marking the noun, so no other noun marker is needed.)
- I saw a good movie last night.
- I ate a big meal before going to work.
- I whacked my toe on a rock. (My is already marking the noun, so no other noun marker is needed for the noun toe.)
- I saw an elephant at the zoo. The elephant was incredibly friendly. (Use an because the elephant is mentioned for the first time, and it begins with a vowel.)

The next time the noun is stated, use the because the sentence is mentioning something specific.

Rule #2: Use the when talking about specific people or things. The is used to mark both singular and plural nouns. For example,
- The dog probably belongs to our neighbor.
- The elevator smells musty.
- The person was wearing blue shorts and a white t-shirt.
- The movie was suspenseful.
- The meal was delicious.
- The rock was huge.
- 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 in a **general sense** about **plural counting nouns or mass nouns**, noun markers are not required. For example,

- 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 is being 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* requires a noun marker because it is singular.)
- My desk is covered with dust. (*Dust* is a mass noun and is being used in the general sense, so no noun marker is needed.) The dust must have blown in from the construction across the street. (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**. For example,

- Bad behavior makes *teachers* angry. (*Teachers* is being used in a general sense.) Bad behavior makes the *teachers* angry. (A specific group of teachers)
- *Water* (general) leaked into my basement. The *water* (from the fire hydrant, from the rainstorm) leaked into my basement.
- *Milk* and *eggs* (general) are kept in the refrigerator. I put the *milk* (that I bought) behind the *eggs* (that I bought).

Source:


For additional questions:

These pages from *A Writer’s Reference with Exercises and Writing about Literature* are especially helpful for English language learners:

- Section M, Multilingual Writers and ESL Challenges, (275-314).
- Sections G2-f and G2-g, Choosing the Correct Verb Tense: (232-37).

See this website for free grammar lessons and more: Dave’s ESL Café.
How to choose articles:

Select a noun.

Does the noun refer to one unique thing?  Yes  Use “the”

No

Can you count this noun?  No  Use no article.

Yes

Is this noun singular?  No  Use no article.

Yes

Is this a proper noun?  Yes  Use what custom requires.

No

Does the noun begin with a vowel sound?  Yes  Use “an”

No

Use “a”


The Writing Center
Winthrop University
Rock Hill, SC 29733-0001
(803) 323-2138
writing_cntr@winthrop.edu