

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:

Hacker, Diana, and Nancy Sommers. *A Writer's Reference with Exercises and Writing about Literature*. 8th ed.
Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015. Print.

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"

Inspired by a chart in *English for Science and Technology for Non-Native Speakers* by Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen (1988).

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