



Figure 1 Logos for the Academic Resource Center and The Writing Center

ARTICLES

The words *a*, *an*, and *the* are called articles. They signal that a noun is about to appear. The noun may come immediately after the article, or there may be describing words between the article and the noun (*the* tree, *a* tall tree, *an* old oak tree).

Two types of nouns to keep in mind when thinking about articles are *count nouns* and *noncount nouns*. Count nouns have plural forms and refer to items that can be counted (students, classes). Noncount nouns usually do not have plural forms and refer to items that cannot be counted (biology, advice, water, bread).

DEFINITE ARTICLE: Use the definite article *the* with nouns whose specific identity is known to the reader. The identity should be clear for one of these reasons:

1. The noun has already been mentioned in a previous sentence or earlier in the sentence.
 - My home has *a* kitchen and two bedrooms. (first mention)
 - *The* kitchen is large, but *the* bedrooms are small. (second mention)
2. The noun is identified by other information in the same sentence.
 - *The* food in our *cafeteria* is not very good. (The phrase *in our cafeteria* identifies *food*.)
3. The speaker knows the listener is thinking about the same item.
 - Where did you park *the* car? (We came together in the same car, so we are both thinking about the same car.)

The can be used in front of all nouns – singular and plural count nouns as well as noncount nouns.

INDEFINITE ARTICLES: Use *a* or *an* with singular count nouns whose specific identity is not known to the reader. In other words, the speaker and the listener are not thinking about exactly the same item. *A* is used before a word beginning with a consonant sound (*a* tree, *a* green apple, *a* university). *An* is used before a word beginning with a vowel sound (*an* oak tree, *an* hour, *an* MTA bus).

- He buys *a soft drink* every day. (not a specific soft drink)
- He also buys *an apple*. (not a specific apple)



Figure 2 Clip art of an apple

With plural nouns whose specific identity is not known to the reader, use *some* or no article at all. (*Some* is really an indefinite pronoun, but it acts like an indefinite article.) *Some* shows an amount but not a specific amount.

- The shoe store has *boots* on sale.
- The shoe store has *some boots* on sale.

Exercise I:

Complete the sentences with the given words. Choose words in the parentheses as necessary.

1. (The / A) dogs in the park are mine.
2. The New York Times is (a / some) famous paper.
3. Kimberlee ate (a / some) banana.
4. Please pass me (the / a) salt.
5. Use (the / a) candles for (a / some) light.

Exercise II:

Here are some conversations. Try to decide whether the speakers probably use *the* or *a/an*. Are the speakers thinking about the same objects or persons?

1. Do you have _____ car?
No. But I have _____ bicycle.
2. Do you need _____ car today, Joe?
Yes.
Okay. But be sure to fill _____ car up with gas sometime today.
3. Did you have a good time at _____ concert last night?
Yes.
So did I.
4. I bought _____ orangutan from him.
How much did it cost?
5. Is Mr. Jones _____ graduate student?
No. He's _____ professor of the class.

Using <i>a, an, or no article</i>	Using <i>a, an, or some</i>	Using <i>the</i>
SINGULAR COUNT NOUNS		
<p><i>A dog</i> makes a good pet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use <i>a</i> with a singular count noun when making a generalization. - The speaker is talking about any dog, dogs in general. 	<p>I saw <i>a dog</i> in my yard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use a with a singular count noun when talking about one thing or person that is not specific. - The speaker is saying, "I saw one dog. It wasn't a specific dog." 	<p>Did you feed <i>the dog</i>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use <i>the</i> with singular count (the dog), plural count (the dogs), and noncount (the fruit) nouns. - A speaker uses <i>the</i> (not <i>a, no article, or some</i>) when the speaker and listener are thinking about the same specific thing(s) or person(s). - The speaker and listener are thinking about the same specific dog.
PLURAL COUNT NOUNS		
<p><u>Dogs</u> make good pets.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use <u>no article</u> with a plural count noun when making a generalization. - The speaker is talking about any dog, all dogs, dogs in general. - Sometimes a speaker uses an expression of quantity when making a generalization: <i>Almost all dogs make good pets. Most dogs are friendly.</i> 	<p>I saw <u>some dogs</u> in my yard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use some with a plural count noun when talking about things or people that are not specific. - The speaker is saying, "I saw more than one dog." - In addition to some, a speaker might use several, a few, a lot of: <i>Several dogs are in my yard.</i> 	<p>Did you feed <u>the dogs</u>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using the with the plural count noun. - The speaker and listener are thinking about the same dogs. <p><i>I had some bananas and some apples. I gave <u>the bananas</u> to Mary.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use the when mentioning a noun the second time. First mention: <i>I had a banana...</i> In the second mention, the listener now knows which bananas the speaker is talking about.
NONCOUNT NOUNS		
<p><u>Fruit</u> is good for you. I like <u>music</u>. <u>Coffee</u> contains <u>caffeine</u>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use no article with a noncount noun when making a generalization. - The speaker is talking about any fruit, all fruit, fruit in general. 	<p>I bought <u>some fruit</u>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A speaker often uses some with a noncount noun when s/he is talking about something that is not specific. - The speaker is saying, "I bought an indefinite amount of fruit. I'm not talking about specific fruit." 	<p><u>The fruit</u> in this bowl is ripe. <u>The music</u> is too loud.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noncount nouns usually do not have plural forms they refer to items that cannot be counted (music, fruit*, water). *You can count pieces of fruit, but not fruit in general. It is the pieces that are counted, not the fruit.

Exercise III:

Fill in the spaces in the following paragraph, choosing from the following articles: *a, an, the, or some*. If no article is required, leave the space blank.

I am _____ student at Valley College. I'm _____ English major now, but I used to study _____ Biology. I enjoy writing papers, but when I have _____ difficult assignment, I go to _____ Writing Center to get _____ help. I am hungry after class, so I eat at _____ cafeteria. I usually buy _____ hamburger and _____ fries.

This handbook is based on the following book:

Azar, Betty Schramper. *Fundamentals of English Grammar*. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents. 206-7.

For further reference, see the following books:

Azar, Betty Schramper. *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents, 1993. 60, 122-3.

Beason, Larry and Mark Lester. *A Commonsense Guide to Grammar and Usage*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford, 2000. 245-75.

All of the above texts are available in The Writing Center.