

Article Use (the, a/an)

When should I use “a”? What about “the”? Why do some words have articles before them but not others? Hopefully, this guide will help make sense of these very little, very meaningful words!

To decide on the article needed, ask three questions of the noun:

1. Is the noun countable or uncountable?
 - If a noun is countable, you can have more than one instance of it. There is the potential for many of these things.
 - Note: A noun can have both countable and uncountable meanings depending on the context of the sentence.
 - E.g. “I prefer to drink water instead of juice.” – Water here is uncountable, since we are referring to water generally.
 - E.g. “We’ll take two waters please.” – Water here is countable, referring to two *glasses* of water.
2. Is the noun plural or singular? – Are you referring to one thing or more than one thing?
3. Is the noun definite or indefinite?
 - A noun is definite when it is clear to your reader which **specific** instance or instances of an entity you are referring to:
 - E.g. “Can I have **the** blue pens?” This is speaking of a particular kind of pen the reader would be aware of.
 - Otherwise, the noun is indefinite, referring to one of many of that thing:
 - E.g. “Can you pass me **a** pen from the bin?” – Pen here is indefinite. There is no specific pen in question; ANY pen will do!
 - Often the first use of a noun will be indefinite and subsequent uses will be definite.



Countable:

	Definite (Specific)	Indefinite (General)
Singular	the E.g. I need to study for the exam tomorrow.	a/an E.g. I hope I never have to write an exam .
Plural	the E.g. The exams that I wrote last year were much easier.	NONE E.g. In university, you will have to write exams .

Uncountable:

	Definite (Specific)	Indefinite (General)
Singular	the E.g. The motivation of this student is evident in her writing.	NONE E.g. Motivation is required to do well on an exam.

Acknowledgements to Jerry Plotnick from the Writing Centre at University of Toronto. Visit: <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/english-language/articles/> for more details!