Unlike many languages, English requires a **determiner** in front of many nouns. The most common kind of determiner is called an **article**, which is one of three specific words: **a**, **an**, or **the**. This handout explains which nouns need a determiner and which do not.

There are two kinds of nouns: **proper** and **common**. Common nouns can be **specific** or **nonspecific**, **countable** or **uncountable**.

#### Proper Nouns

Proper nouns name specific people, places, or things. They always begin with capital letters.

   The **Chans**, who are driving across **Florida**, went to **Orlando** to visit the **Johnsons**.

Proper nouns can be **singular** (Florida, Orlando) or **plural** (Chans, Johnsons). Plural proper nouns often require the article **the**. Singular proper nouns do not usually require an article or any kind of determiner, although an exception is made for some vast areas: the Pacific Ocean, the Sahara desert.

#### Common Nouns

Common nouns name nonspecific objects or concepts and do not begin with capital letters.

   Those two dogs are going to the **park** to meet their **friends** and watch some **people**.

**Common nouns usually do require one or more determiners.** The determiners used with common nouns include one or more of the following:

- **articles**
- **demonstrative adjectives**
- **possessive adjectives**
- **possessive nouns**
- **quantity words**
- **numbers**

   - **a**, **an**, **the**
   - **this**, **that**, **these**, **those**
   - **my**, **your**, **his**, **hers**, **ours**, **its**, **their**
   - Abdul's, the students'
   - **some**, **many**, **a few**, **a lot**, **each**
   - one, two, ten...

Look again at the example of common nouns above. Notice the determiners used: **those two dogs**, **the park**, **their friends**, and **some people**.

Use the article **a** before words beginning with a consonant sound when the word is spoken out loud (**a class**, **a hotdog**, **a uniform**). Use the article **an** before words beginning with a vowel sound when the word is spoken out loud (**an expert**, **an honor**, **an understanding**).
Specific and Nonspecific Nouns

When a noun refers to one specific thing that the reader and writer are both already familiar with, it's used with the article the. To determine if a noun is being use specifically, look at its context.

I bought a dog on Monday and **the dog** ran away on Tuesday.

Here, "the dog" is a specific reference, referring to the dog that I bought on Monday. A specific reference is when the writer and reader agree that a noun is somehow unique or familiar.

When a noun does not refer to a specific thing that the reader and writer are both already familiar with, it's used with the article a or an.

I ran over a dog.

In the example, "a dog" is a nonspecific reference. Was it your dog? Was it the dog I bought on Monday? What color was it? You are not expected to know those answers. With a nonspecific reference, the writer and reader agree it could be any dog.

Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Many common nouns are **countable** nouns. In the singular, they are often used with the articles a and an, which express the idea of one (1) individual unit. Countable nouns refer to things that have a distinct form and can be counted individually, so their names have a plural form. The plural form may be irregular; when in doubt, check your dictionary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One book</th>
<th>A book</th>
<th>Two books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One child</td>
<td>A child</td>
<td>Two children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One example</td>
<td>An example</td>
<td>Two examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One goose</td>
<td>A goose</td>
<td>Two geese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One analysis</td>
<td>An analysis</td>
<td>Two analyses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A countable noun in the singular almost never stands alone; it requires an article or some other determiner.

(**wrong**): He has gun in pocket.

(**right**): He has a gun in his pocket.

(**right**): He has the gun in his pocket.

(**right**): He has my gun in his pocket.

Since a plural countable noun refers to more than one person or thing, the definite article the can be used but the indefinite article a or an cannot. The is not used before a plural noun that refers to persons or things in general, but it can be used before a plural noun that describes specific persons or things.

(**wrong**): A doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.

(**right**): Doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.

(**wrong**): The doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.

(**right**): Doctors do not know how to prevent cancer.
Some nouns can be countable or not, depending on how they are used.

Iron (Fe, a chemical element) is not countable.
An iron (the appliance you press your clothes with) is countable. Therefore,

Many things are still made of iron in the twenty-first century, but an iron is not one of them.

Other nouns refer to things that cannot be counted individually at all:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising</th>
<th>Equipment</th>
<th>Honor</th>
<th>Machinery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>Garbage</td>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>Scenery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These uncountable common nouns have no singular or plural form. They never take a or an because they cannot be counted individually; they often take no article at all. However, if you want to limit the quantity you’re referring to, you can use a quantity word like “some” or much.”

(wrong): Ms. Sanchez gave me a knowledge, and I responded with an enthusiasm.
(wrong): Ms. Sanchez gave me knowledges, and I responded with enthusiasms.
(right): Ms. Sanchez gave me knowledge, and I responded with enthusiasm.

(wrong): Ms. Sanchez gave me knowledges, and I responded with enthusiasms.
(right): Ms. Sanchez gave me some knowledge (less than total knowledge) of the language, and I responded with enthusiasm.

### How to Decide What Article to Use with a Noun—If Any

Once you have determined if a noun is proper or common, countable or uncountable, specific or nonspecific, you can apply some general rules. But be careful! **These rules are only general and you will come across exceptions.** Some common exceptions are listed at the end of this handout.

Is it a proper noun?

I. If YES, it is a proper noun, then is it singular?

   A. YES, it is singular. Most singular proper nouns take no article at all.

      Yoko went to Orlando on Friday to see Mickey Mouse.

   B. NO, it is plural. Most plural proper nouns take the.

      The Olsens and the Simons are going to the Great Lakes.
II. If NO, it is a common noun, then is it referring to something very specific that the reader is already aware of?

A. YES, it is specific. Most specific common nouns take the.

   Please pass the sugar.

B. NO, it’s not specific or previously identified.

   1. Is the common noun countable?

      a. NO, it is not countable. If you are making a generalization, use no article; if you are limiting a generalization, use a quantity word like some or little.

         Rice tends to burn if not watched carefully.  
         Some rice, like basmati, can be hard to find.

      b. YES, it is countable. Is it singular?

         i. YES, it is singular. Use a or an.

            A doctor can prescribe this medicine for you.  
            An accident can have many causes.

         ii. NO, it is plural. Use no article or use a plural quantity word like many or few.

            Bicycles are inexpensive ways to travel.  
            Some classes require internet access.

■ Common Exceptions

Unique objects: the earth, the sun, the moon, but Earth, Mars

Places: the United States, the Sahara, the Hague, the Statue of Liberty

Bodies of water: the Pacific, the Nile, the Mediterranean, the Great Lakes, but Lake Superior

Diseases and ailments: a cold, a headache, the flu, but pneumonia, cancer

Destination: to go to the store, to go to the post office, to go to the bank, but to go to school, to go to church, to go to bed, to go home

Locations: at home, in bed, in school, in college, but at the University

Expressions of time: in the morning, all the time, most of the time, since the 1940’s, the past 5 years, but at night, sometimes, in time, on time
1. Americans of all ages are using drugs in greater variety and in greater numbers than ever before. Almost every kind of prescription drug that has some effect on mood is being misused at this time. It seems today that if chemical can be abused, it will be abused. And, since use of all sorts of drugs in next ten years is expected to increase manyfold, we have no reason to believe that problem of drug abuse will soon disappear. When we explore causes of drug abuse, we should remember that many of today’s drugs are thousands of years old. Throughout recorded history man has used pleasure-giving and pain-killing substances for comfort and protection against hardships of life. What is new is explosion of experimentation with drugs among our young people. Concurrent with drug use is lack of interest shown by segment of youth in such traditional activities as schooling and jobs.

2. Automotive paint is such common substance that motoring public is often unaware that small chips can be very valuable clues in hit-and-run investigations. Paint transfer occurs in many collisions involving vehicles. At scene of hit-and-run accident, for example, police personnel often collect paint samples from struck vehicle, from related debris, or from clothing of struck pedestrian, either in smear form or as actual chips. Criminologists are then asked to examine paint samples and to classify or individualize them. Classification helps to determine probable make, model, and year of vehicle involved and is useful in early stages of investigation. Individualization is more specific characterization, establishing that paint came from particular vehicle. Simplest methods of paint characterization involve microscopic examination of color, surface texture, surface markings and layer structure, and matching of broken edges.

3. Air conditioner has become fixture in many American homes, and more people are buying one every year. More than six million units were sold in 1970. Amount of energy devoted to residential air conditioning increased at average growth rate of 15.5 percent per year between 1960 and 1968, and much of increase in total electrical residential consumption between 1960 and 1970 was due to air conditioning. Estimated 30 percent of national use of electricity in summer months consists of air conditioning for homes and apartments. Size and variety of home air conditioning equipment vary greatly, ranging from manually controlled window unit to complex system that gives independent temperature and humidity control to every room in house. One of most important differences among many models of air conditioners on market today is that some are more energy-efficient than others. It would be wise--not only from energy conservation standpoint but from monetary one--for consumers to start making choices based on efficiency criterion. While providing same amount of cooling, less efficient machine can consume 2-6 times as much electricity used as more efficient one.
Practice II

Fill in the blanks with the or a/an. If no article is required, leave the space blank.

4. Student: How did I do on ___test?
   Teacher: Well, actually you didn't do very well. Don't you have ___tutor?
   Student: Yes. ___Mary has been tutoring me for ___two weeks now. It's been difficult to meet, though, because I don't have ___car.
   ___Mary does have ___small Toyota, but it often breaks down.

5. Son: Dad, can I have ____car tonight? I want to take Kim to____movie.
   Dad: That depends. Don't you have ____paper to write?
   Son: Yes, but it's almost done, and, besides, ____friend told me that Ms. Miller postponed it to ____next Friday.
   Dad: Well, okay. But be back by 12:30. We'll be watching____Conan O'Brian Show.
   Son: Thanks, Dad. By the way, could I go buy____new shirt for ____last school dance?

6. ____wine that I bought ____other day at ____store around ____corner would probably taste good with cheese. I bought ____Swiss cheese yesterday along with ____bottle of wine. But I am not certain if ____Swiss cheese tastes good with ____burgundy, which is ____type which I bought. I will ask my friend about ____matter; she knows ____great deal about ____wines and cheeses.

7. Whenever I see ____stray dog in ____street, I feel sorry for ____poor animal. I think it should have ____home and children to play with, or ____adult to take care of it.

8. It was ____beautiful day. ____sky was ____unusual shade of blue. ____grass was bright green, and ____flowers were just starting to bloom. I saw ____next-door neighbor children playing in ____yard next to mine. I could not tell if they were playing ____particular game, but they certainly were enjoying ____day and ____weather.

9. ____good way to learn how to spell ____word is to imagine that you can see ____word written in your mind. If you have trouble with spelling ____words, you may need to imagine ____word for ____long time. Then, you should try to write ____word on ____piece of ____paper. Compare ____word you have written with ____word you studied. If ____two words are ____same, then you know that you have learned ____ new word.

Answers

1. Americans of all ages are using drugs in greater variety and in greater numbers than ever before. Almost every kind of prescription drug that has some effect on mood is being misused at this time. It seems today that if a chemical can be abused, it will be abused. And, since the use of all sorts of drugs in next ten years is expected to increase manyfold, we have no reason to believe that the problem of drug abuse will soon disappear. When we explore the causes of drug abuse, we should remember that many of today's drugs are thousands of years old. Throughout recorded history man has used pleasure-giving and pain-killing substances for comfort and protection against hardships of life. What is new is the explosion of experimentation with drugs among our young people. Concurrent with drug use is the lack of interest shown by the segment of youth in such traditional activities as schooling and jobs.
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