How to Use Articles in Your Writing

There are several factors that influence which article to use with certain nouns. Remember: a noun names a person, place, thing, or idea. There are three articles that you can choose from: “the”, “an”, and “a”. Use the chart below to determine which article you should use with a noun.

Quick Guide to Articles

Singular Common Nouns

Countable
- **Specific**: use the article ‘the’ (e.g. “The dog is back again.”)
- **General**: use the article ‘a’/’an’ (e.g. “There is a dog in the back alley.”)

Uncountable
- **Specific**: use the article ‘the’ (e.g. “I am against the war in Afghanistan.”)
- **General**: don’t use an article (e.g. “I am against war.”)

Plural Common Nouns

- **Specific**: use the article ‘the’ (e.g. “The dogs in the park play with one another.”)
- **General**: don’t use an article (e.g. “Dogs are great.”)

Proper Nouns

- **Singular**: don’t use an article (e.g. “Kate was at the store the other day.”)
- **Plural**: use the article ‘the’ (e.g. “The Canadians are winning the tournament”)

Understanding the Quick Guide to Articles

Is it Countable or Uncountable?

Nouns can generally be divided into either countable or uncountable.

Countable Nouns

Countable nouns can either be singular or plural in a language learner’s dictionary, they are usually marked as [C]. Examples of countable nouns include:

**Singular form**
- dog
- pen
- child
- expense
• certainty

Plural form
• dogs
• pens
• children
• expenses
• certainties

Uncountable Nouns
Uncountable nouns do not have singular or plural forms. In a language learner's dictionary, they are usually marked as [U]. An example of an uncountable noun is the word rice: although rice grains are countable, we cannot talk about rices.

Other examples of uncountable nouns include the following:
• rice
• wisdom
• chaos
• anger
• oxygen
• peace

Countable or Uncountable Nouns
Some nouns, however, can be both countable and uncountable, depending on the context. Examples of this type of nouns include the following:

• **Hope**, e.g. “We live in hope of a better tomorrow” and “She shared her hopes for the future.”
• **Childhood**, e.g. “Childhood should be a happy time for everyone” and “Hannah’s childhood was a happy one.”
• **Hair**, e.g. “Ivan has thick black hair” and “Recently, he has noticed a few grey hairs.”
• **Man**, e.g. “Man is master of the universe” and “The men liked to sit separately after dinner.”

Is it Specific or General?
In determining which, if any, article should be used, you need to ask the question: Am I referring to some- thing specific or general?

Specific Nouns
Specific nouns refer to a specific member(s) of a group. Specific (or definite) nouns are known to both writer and reader or speaker and listener.
Examples:

- The students were working hard for their exams.
- I couldn’t get the car to start.

General Nouns

General nouns refer to all members of a group.

Examples:

- Students have a reputation for playing hard and studying only when necessary.
- A car is a necessary part of modern life.

**Is it a Proper Noun?**

A proper noun is the name of a person or a particular thing. Proper nouns are usually written with a capital letter.

Generally, the definite article (the) is not used with most singular proper nouns; for example, you would not refer to your friend Anna as “the Anna”. We do, however, use the definite article for proper nouns in the plural form: we would refer to Anna’s family as the Wilsons. Other examples of proper nouns include the following:

**Singular nouns**

- Kate
- Canada
- Jamaica
- (Mount) Everest
- Toronto Island

**Plural nouns**

- The Canadians
- The United States of America
- The Bahamas
- The Himalayas
- The Thousand Islands

There are exceptions to the above; it is advisable that you memorize whether or not the proper nouns you use regularly need the definite article.