

Using a, an, and the with Common Nouns

The English articles (*a, an,* and *the*) are part of a larger system of determiners*, words that, like adjectives, modify the meaning of nouns. Although the basic rules for using articles are few, the nuances of the system are daunting for non-native writers of English. The following table may help: When you are puzzling over a particular noun in your writing, consider first the level of specificity that suits your context and then check to see that the form you have selected corresponds. Following the table you will find brief definitions and examples of noun types, tips to help you with article-noun pairing, and a list of ways that a writing consultant can help you improve your handling of nouns in academic writing.

* Determiners function in the following ways with respect to the nouns they modify: (1) to specify or generalize, (2) to quantify or partition, (3) to convey rank or order, (4) to convey possession or ownership, and (5) to convey physical or mental distance from the speaker/writer.

Degree of specificity	Corresponding forms	Examples (underlined)
—Specific reference— A specific noun is one whose referent is unique and identifiable from either the context or from background knowledge known to the writer and the intended audience.	 the + singular countable noun the + plural countable noun the + uncountable noun the + comparative or superlative adjective, or ordinal number + singular or plural noun the + abstract noun 	 The institution has a number of smart classrooms. All the schools in our consortium are Christian colleges. Many students felt the homework was too much for a two-credit class. The nearest star, other than the sun, is Polaris. The first day of classes can be exhilarating as well as terrifying. the innocence of children; the grace of God
—Generic reference— A generic noun encompasses all members of a particular class.	• the + singular countable noun that names a class	A common college writing assignment is the term paper. The largest mammal is the blue whale. The academic degree is an artifact of higher education.
—General reference— A general noun is one whose referent is less inclusive than an entire class and not identifiable as unique from the written context or assumed background knowledge of the writer and intended audience.	 a/an + singular countable noun Ø + plural countable noun Ø □ + uncountable noun Ø □ □ abstract noun 	 The student wrote <u>a term paper</u> on Korean politics. <u>Academic degrees</u> are conferred upon students who have successfully completed the requirements of particular academic programs. <u>Information</u> is readily available online. <u>Pasta</u> is served with nearly every meal. Let <u>freedom ring</u>. <u>German</u> and <u>mathematics</u> are my favorite subjects.

BRIEF REMINDERS

A/an—The choice of article is not an issue of spelling but of phonology. Words beginning with consonant sounds take the article a; words beginning with vowel sounds take an. The word *court* begins with the sound /k/, *uniform* with /y/, and *honor* with /a/; therefore, *a court*, *a uniform*, and *an honor* are correct.

Common nouns: When we refer to objects or notions that are not unique entities, we use common nouns. Here are several examples: pencil, classroom, dogs, technology, education, way, honor, perfection. (Note: The contrasting category is proper nouns, which refer to unique entities, such as Barack Obama, the Galapagos Islands, Mt. McKinley, etc.)

Common nouns may be further classified as countable or uncountable:

- Countable nouns can, by definition, be rendered in singular or plural form (e.g., plate/plates, course/courses, song/songs).
- **Uncountable nouns** are rendered only in singular form. They often refer to relatively shapeless substances such as *water* or *rice*, or to abstract notions or emotions, such as grandeur, information, homework, servitude, exuberance, etc.
- Nouns that can be countable or uncountable: Quite a few nouns can be rendered countable or uncountable. In general, the countable sense is more concrete and the uncountable, more abstract. Here are a few examples in which the pertinent nouns have been highlighted:

COUNTABLE:

The lights went out during the storm. Several **cheeses** pair well with this dish. The **writings** of C. S. Lewis include *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Eastern and Western **philosophies** reflect different worldviews.

UNCOUNTABLE:

Light is necessary to our wellbeing. **Cheese** is made from milk.

C. S. Lewis's writing often conveys profound ideas in simple language.

My undergraduate major was philosophy.

TIPS

- 1. In extended written discourse, too much specificity burdens the reader, who must decide each time whether specific reference is warranted. To set your reader at ease, I suggest you generalize nouns when you can and specify them only when you must. The choice between generalizing and specifying is not always obvious, so you may want to enlist the help of a writing consultant at times. Here are a few examples gleaned from face-to-face consultations with ESL writers:
 - **Example:** "The author points out disadvantages of the traditional education."
 - Comment: On being questioned, the writer recognized that her reference was not to a specific instance of traditional education, but to a general type of education; she, therefore, deleted the definite article.
 - **Example:** "The Barthian scholars read Augustine differently [than another group of scholars]."
 - Comment: The writer had thought that reference to a family of scholars was inherently specific. On being questioned, he realized he did not intend to reference all scholars of Barth (because he could not claim to know the opinion of every one of them), nor did he have in mind a few whom he could name. To repair the meaning, he chose a *quantifying* determiner, instead: "many Barthian scholars...."
 - **Example:** "In the darkest nights he sees my fear and calms me."
 - **Comment:** In this personal reflection, "the darkest nights" was perfectly grammatical, but the reflection had a literary tone overall. After discussion, the writer decided to break the grammatical rule and render the phrase "in darkest nights," thus harmonizing this phrase with the literary tone of her piece.
- 2. A writing consultant can also help you with related difficulties, such as
 - knowing whether a given noun is countable, uncountable, or can be rendered both ways;
 - choosing the appropriate noun-form of a given root for a particular context;
 - selecting an abstract noun for an abstract context or a concrete noun for a concrete context; and
 - achieving balance among the nouns in a particular passage in terms of singular/plural, countable/uncountable, and concrete/abstract options.