

# 45 ESL Pointers



This section covers rules that most native speakers of English take for granted but that are useful for speakers of English as a second language (ESL).

## Articles with Count and Noncount Nouns

Articles are noun markers—they signal that a noun will follow. (A noun is a word used to name something—a person, place, thing, or idea.) The indefinite articles are *a* and *an*. (Use *a* before a word that begins with a consonant sound: **a** car, **a** piano, **a** uniform—the *u* in *uniform* sounds like the consonant *y* plus *u*. Use *an* before a word beginning with a vowel sound: **an** egg, **an** office, **an** honor—the *h* in *honor* is silent.) The definite article is *the*. An article may immediately precede a noun: **a** smile, **the** reason. Or it may be separated from the noun by modifiers: **a** slight smile, **the** very best reason.

To know whether to use an article with a noun and which article to use, you must recognize count and noncount nouns.

**Count nouns** name people, places, things, or ideas that can be counted and made into plurals, such as *teacher*, *restroom*, and *joke* (*one teacher*, *two restrooms*, *three jokes*).

**Noncount nouns** refer to things or ideas that cannot be counted, such as *flour*, *history*, and *truth*. The following box lists and illustrates common types of noncount nouns.

**Note** There are various other noun markers besides articles, including quantity words (*some*, *several*, *a lot of*), numerals (*one*, *ten*, *120*), demonstrative adjectives (*this*, *these*), possessive adjectives (*my*, *your*, *our*), and possessive nouns (*Jaime's*, *the school's*).

### Common Noncount Nouns

*Abstractions and emotions:* anger, bravery, health, pride, truth

*Activities:* baseball, jogging, reading, teaching, travel

*Foods:* bread, broccoli, chocolate, cheese, flour

*Gases and vapors:* air, helium, oxygen, smoke, steam

*Languages and areas of study:* Korean, Spanish, algebra, history, physics

*Liquids:* blood, gasoline, lemonade, tea, water

*Materials that come in bulk form:* aluminum, cloth, dust, sand, soap

*Natural occurrences:* magnetism, moonlight, rain, snow, thunder

*Other things that cannot be counted:* clothing, furniture, homework, machinery, money, news, transportation, vocabulary, work

The quantity of a noncount noun can be expressed with a word or words called a **qualifier**, such as *some*, *a lot of*, *a unit of*, and so on. (In the following two examples, the qualifiers are shown in *italic* type, and the noncount nouns are shown in **boldface** type.)

Please have *some* **patience**.

We need to buy *two bags of* **flour** today.

Some words can be either count or noncount nouns, depending on whether they refer to one or more individual items or to something in general.

Certain **cheeses** give some people a headache.

(This sentence refers to individual cheeses; *cheese* in this case is a count noun.)

**Cheese** is made in almost every country where milk is produced.

(This sentence refers to cheese in general; in this case, *cheese* is a noncount noun.)

## Using *a* or *an* with Nonspecific Singular Count Nouns

Use *a* or *an* with singular nouns that are nonspecific. A noun is nonspecific when the reader doesn't know its specific identity.

**A** left-hander faces special challenges with right-handed tools.

(The sentence refers to any left-hander, not a specific one.)

Today, our cat proudly brought **a** baby bird into the house.  
(The reader isn't familiar with the bird. This is the first time it is mentioned.)

## Using *the* with Specific Nouns

In general, use *the* with all specific nouns—specific singular, plural, and noncount nouns. Certain conditions make a noun specific and therefore require the article *the*.

A noun is specific in the following cases:

- When it has already been mentioned once

Today, our cat proudly brought a baby bird into the house. Luckily, **the** bird was still alive.  
(*The* is used with the second mention of *bird*.)

- When it is identified by a word or phrase in the sentence

**The** pockets in the boy's pants are often filled with sand and dirt.  
(*Pockets* is identified by the words *in the boy's pants*.)

- When its identity is suggested by the general context

At Willy's Diner last night, **the** service was terrible and **the** food was worse.  
(The reader can conclude that the service and food being discussed were at Willy's Diner.)

- When it is unique

There will be an eclipse of **the** moon tonight.  
(Earth has only one moon.)

- When it is preceded by a superlative adjective (*best, biggest, wisest*)

**The** best way to store broccoli is to refrigerate it in an open plastic bag.

## Omitting Articles

Omit articles with nonspecific plurals and noncount nouns. Plurals and noncount nouns are nonspecific when they refer to something in general.

**Pockets** didn't exist until the end of the 1700s.

**Service** is as important as **food** to a restaurant's success.

Iris serves her children homemade **lemonade**.



## Using *the* with Proper Nouns

Proper nouns name particular people, places, things, or ideas and are always capitalized. Most proper nouns do not require articles; those that do, however, require *the*. Following are general guidelines about when and when not to use *the*.

**1** Do not use *the* for most singular proper nouns, including names of the following:

- *People and animals* (Benjamin Franklin, Fido)
- *Continents, states, cities, streets, and parks* (North America, Illinois, Chicago, First Avenue, Washington Square)
- *Most countries* (France, Mexico, Russia)
- *Individual bodies of water, islands, and mountains* (Lake Erie, Long Island, Mount Everest)

**2** Use *the* for the following types of proper nouns:

- *Plural proper nouns* (the Turners, the United States, the Great Lakes, the Rocky Mountains)
- *Names of large geographic areas, deserts, oceans, seas, and rivers* (the South, the Gobi Desert, the Atlantic Ocean, the Black Sea, the Mississippi River)
- *Names with the format the \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_* (the Fourth of July, the People's Republic of China, the University of California)

### ACTIVITY 1

Underline the correct form of the noun in parentheses.

1. (A library, Library) is a valuable addition to a town.
2. This morning, the mail carrier brought me (a letter, the letter) from my cousin.
3. As I read (a letter, the letter), I began to laugh at what my cousin wrote.
4. Every night we have to do lots of (homework, homeworks).
5. We are going to visit our friends in (the Oregon, Oregon) next week.
6. Children should treat their parents with (the respect, respect).
7. The soldiers in battle showed a great deal of (courage, courages).
8. A famous sight in Arizona is (Grand Canyon, the Grand Canyon).
9. My son would like to eat (the spaghetti, spaghetti) at every meal.
10. It is dangerous to stare directly at (the sun, sun).