

Articles

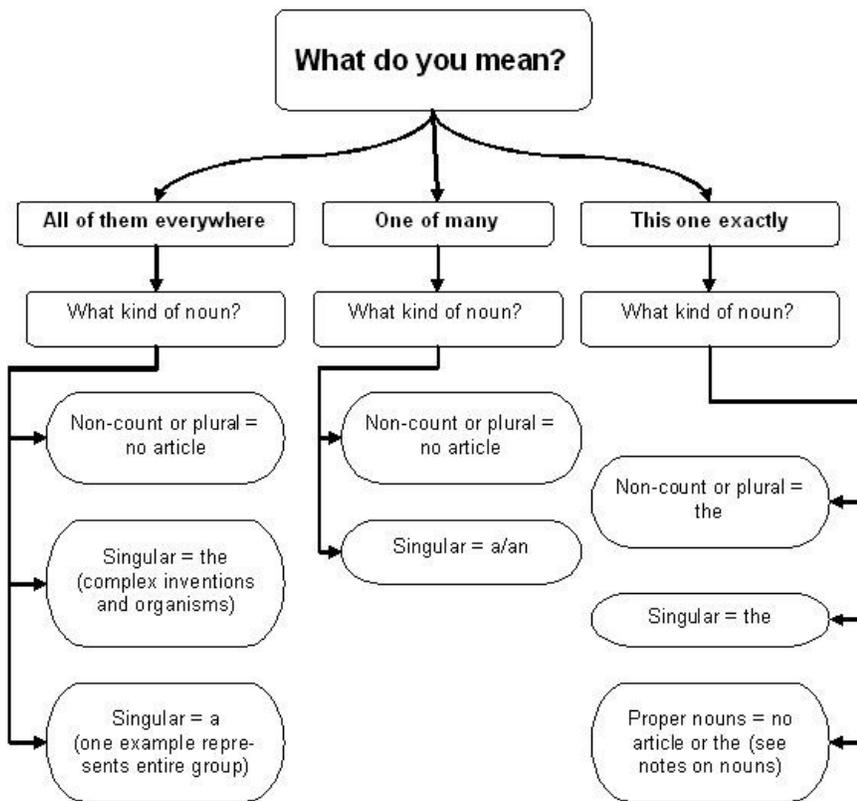


Learning to use articles correctly is difficult for many non-native English speakers, especially if their native languages do not have articles. This handout is a guide to correct article usage, but because the system is so complex and idiosyncratic there are several exceptions to the rules that must be learned and memorized over time. Keep in mind that while using the wrong article may distract a native reader, it usually does not prevent a reader from understanding your meaning.

When deciding which article to use, you must first identify whether the object is **definite** or **indefinite**. An article is **definite** if it refers to something specific that is known to the writer and the reader. In the sentence, “Please feed the dog,” the **definite** article “the” is used because both parties know which dog is being referred to. But, in the sentence, “I want a cat,” the **indefinite** article “a” is used because there is no specific cat in mind.

The second step is to identify whether the noun is **countable** or **uncountable**. **Countable** nouns refer to people, places, or things that can be counted (one cups/two cups , one bird/two birds). **Uncountable/ non-count** nouns often refer to food, beverages, substances, or abstractions (meat, tea, steel, information).

Try using this flow chart to help you identify the correct article.



Example

Can you buy me __ cup of coffee at Starbucks?

Q. *What do you mean?*

A. One of many. Any cup of coffee at Starbucks will do.

Q. *What kind of noun is it? Non-count, plural, or singular?*

A. I only want one cup of coffee: singular!

Because the noun “cup” starts with a consonant sound—“c”—use “A.”

Can you buy me a cup of coffee at Starbucks?

Exceptions to the Rules/ Trouble Spots

The flow chart will help you identify the correct article about 80% of the time, but there are a lot of exceptions with articles that you will become more familiar with the more you read and write and make use of them.

Definite and Indefinite Nouns: It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a noun is definite or indefinite, as it often depends on the situation. The sentence, “Please get ___ cup from the cupboard,” could work with “a” or “the” depending on whether the listeners knows which cup the speaker might want, or depending on how many cups the speaker has in his cupboard.

Proper Names: Names of people (“George Washington”) don’t get articles, though titles often do (“the President”). Proper names for places sometimes use a definite article (“the”) and sometimes use no article. For example, “the Grand Canyon” has an article but “Niagara Falls” does not. There is no rule for this. When in doubt, type the name into Google and see if “the” is typically used.

Count Nouns: Whether a noun can be counted depends on the situation. For example, “sugar” isn’t *usually* a countable noun. (No one would say, “Can you sweep up 40,000 sugars?”) However, in a restaurant, someone might ask you to “pass a sugar.” Here the speaker really means to “pass a *packet* of sugar.” Also someone might ask you if you want to get a coffee.” Though “coffee” is not usually a countable noun, because the speaker is talking about a specific unit of coffee—“a *cup* of coffee”—an article is used.

Multiple Correct Answers: Sometimes, when deciding between articles, you might find that there is more than one correct answer. For example, one can say, “We stopped the car so **the** ducks could cross the road,” or “We stopped the car so **ducks** could cross the road.”

Sample Sentences

1. Dr. Weatherspoon provides ___ interesting perspective on article use in ___ English language
2. Peter says he likes watching ___ movies, but he always falls asleep.
3. President Obama looked all over ___ White House for ___ coffee.
4. Whenever Jane goes to ___ restaurant next to her apartment, she always orders ___ spaghetti.

Answers: 1. “an,” “the” 2. no article 3. “the,” three possible answers: “a,” “the,” and no article 4. “the,” no article

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