



A Simple Guide to Using Articles

If a noun is

then

ALWAYS use one of these forms:

Countable
If a noun is countable, you can attach a number to it.

e.g., two *jobs*, three *courses*, one *program*

Uncountable
If a noun is uncountable, you cannot attach a number to it. An uncountable noun is likely one of the following:

- an abstraction
e.g., *honesty, health, intelligence, knowledge, poverty*
- an area of study or activity
e.g., *agriculture, business, cooking, economics, hockey*
- a substance that can be counted only by unit of measure or mass
e.g., *water, milk, oil, dirt, beef, flour*
- a collection
e.g., *clothing, furniture, hardware, information, luggage, money*
- a natural or physical phenomenon
e.g., *daylight, cold, gravity, electricity*

Tricky Nouns!
Some nouns can be countable or not, depending on whether they are referring to something abstract or something specific. Do not use an article with nouns that refer to all of its type or a concept in general.
e.g., *crime* doesn't pay. Several *crimes* were reported.

Nothing at all: if the noun has a number attached or is plural by itself.

e.g., *students are required to register by June 1. Glaciers flow under the pressure of their own mass. Interest rates are falling.*

A/AN: if the noun is single and referring to one of many.

- for the first time
e.g., *I bought a CD and an I-Pod today. Do you know a good restaurant?*
- in general
e.g., *it is good for a student to have a job.*

THE: if the noun refers to something specific or unique. It is specific or unique likely for the following reasons:

- it is the only one in a given environment
e.g., *the sky, the sun, the weather, the subject, the dog, the telephone.*
- it was mentioned before
e.g., *the CD I bought was on sale.*
- it is defined by a phrase following it
e.g., *the book traces the history of warfare. The question raised...*

Note: With a specific noun, you can also use the possessive form and demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those) instead of **THE**:

- possessives
e.g., *John's job, my courses, their objections*
- demonstratives (this, that, these those)
e.g., *this job, that star, those courses, these reasons*

Nothing at all: if the noun refers to a thing or activity in general.

e.g., *Lacrosse is Canada's national sport. Work experience is important. Homelessness is a problem in Western society. I want to study history. Do you have furniture for your apartment?*

Use the definite article (THE) when a noun has a unique referent (i.e., when it refers to something unique or specific).

When it

- is the only one
e.g., *the best solution, the present location, the future, the 1940s, the third stage, the next step, the Bow River*
- is the only one in a given environment
e.g., *the dog, the premier, the interest rate, the budget*
- is the only one being indicated
e.g., *pointing to the window, working with the student*
- has been mentioned previously
e.g., *I went to a movie. The movie I saw...*
- represents an entire type of thing
e.g., *the polar bear, the Boeing 747*
- refers to an invention
e.g., *The Iphone revolutionized*
- is defined (made specific) by a phrase following it
e.g., *the concepts discussed last class; the writing on the wall, the girl with the bewildered look*

If a noun does not have a unique referent,

- **Use the indefinite article (A/AN)** if the noun is countable and singular
- **Use no article (neither A nor THE)** if the noun is countable and plural
- **Use no article (neither A nor THE)** if the noun is not countable

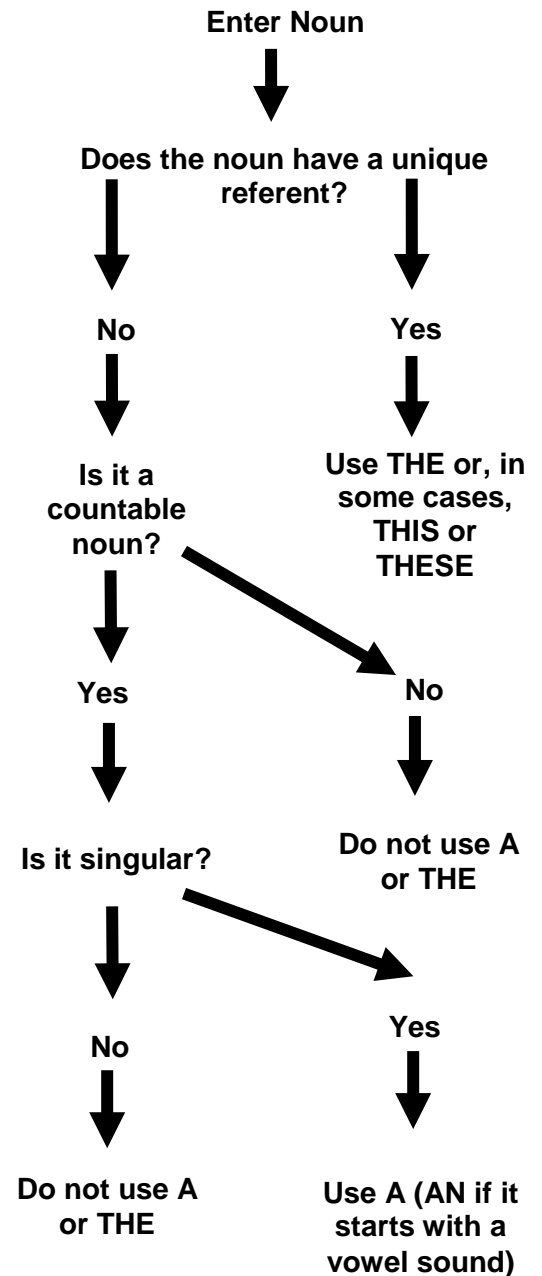
A noun is countable, when you can attach a number to it (e.g., eight computers) and make it plural.

Non-countable Nouns:

- abstractions
e.g., *assistance, support, intelligence, health*
- certain substances (liquids, gases, materials, or particles)
e.g., *coffee, milk, meat, dirt*
- natural or physical phenomena
e.g., *thunder, heat, electricity*
- certain collections
e.g., *hardware, scenery, traffic, news,*
- areas of study or activity
e.g., *statistics, homework, hiking, cooking, and most nouns ending with ‘-ing’*

Note: Some nouns can be either countable or not, depending on whether they are referring to something specific (and countable) or general (and non-countable).

e.g., *wars/war; televisions/television; joys/joy; powers/power, businesses/business*



¹ Flowchart is adapted from Figure 18-2 of Huckin, T.N. & Olsen, L.A. (1983) *English for science and technology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 380.