

Basic Article Usage

A speaker uses generic nouns to make generalizations. A **generic** noun represents a whole class of things; it is not a specific, real, concrete thing, but rather a symbol of a whole group. In **(a)** and **(b)** below, the speaker is talking about any banana, all bananas, and bananas in general. In **(c)**: The speaker is talking about any and all fruit, fruit in general. Notice that no article (**Ø**) is used to make generalizations with plural count nouns, as in **(b)**, and with non-count nouns, as in **(c)**.

Article Usage

- (a) Singular Count Noun
- (b) Plural Count Noun
- (c) Non count Noun

Example

- A banana is yellow
- Ø Bananas are yellow.
- Ø Fruit is good for you.

Indefinite Nouns: Using A or Some

Indefinite nouns are actual things (not symbols), but they are not specifically identified. In **(d)**, the speaker is not referring to “this banana” or “that banana” or “the banana that you gave me,” the speaker is simply saying that s/he ate one banana. The listener does not know nor needs to know which specific banana was eaten; it was simply one banana out of that whole group of things in this world called bananas. In **(e)** and **(f)**, some is often used with indefinite plural count nouns and indefinite non-count nouns. In addition to some, a speaker might use two, a few, several, a lot of, etc., with **plural count nouns**, or a little, a lot of, etc., with **non-count nouns**.

Article Usage

- (d) Singular Count Noun
- (e) Plural Count Noun
- (f) Non count Noun

Example

- I ate a banana
- I ate some bananas
- I ate some fruit

Definitive Nouns: Using The

A noun is definite when both the speaker and the listener are thinking about the same specific thing. In **(g)**, the speaker uses the because the listener knows which specific banana the speaker is talking about, i.e., that particular banana which the listener gave to the speaker. Notice that the is used with both **singular and plural count nouns** and with **non-count nouns**.

Article Usage

- (g) Singular Count Noun
- (h) Plural Count Noun
- (i) Non-count Noun

Example

- Thank you for the banana
- Thank you for the bananas
- Thank you for the fruit.

Usually **a/an** is used with a singular generic count noun. Examples: **A window** is made of glass. Parents must give **a child** love. **A box** has six sides. However, **the** is sometimes used with a singular generic count noun (not a plural generic count noun, not a generic non-count noun). “Generic the” is commonly used with, in particular:

1. Species of animals: **The blue whale** is the largest mammal on earth.
2. Inventions: Who invented **the telephone/ the refrigerator/ the airplane?**
3. Musical instruments: I’d like to learn to play **the piano**.

General Guidelines for Article Usage

GUIDELINE: Use the when you know or assume that your listener is familiar with and thinking about the same specific thing or person you are thinking about.

- **Examples:** The sun is bright today; Please open the door; Omar is in the kitchen.

GUIDELINE: Use the for the second mention of an *indefinite noun**. In the example below, the first mention = some dogs, a cat, a mouse, a hole; the second mention = the dogs, the car, the mouse, the hole.

- **Example:** Yesterday I saw some dogs. The dogs were chasing a cat. The cat was chasing a mouse. The mouse ran into a hole. The hole was very small.

* “the” is not used for the second mention of a generic noun. Compare:

- What colour is a banana (*generic noun*)? A banana (*generic noun*) is yellow.
- He offered me a banana (*indefinite noun*) or a pear. I chose the pear (*definite noun*).

GUIDELINE: Do **NOT** use the with a **plural count noun** (e.g., *apples*) or a **non-count noun** (e.g., *gold*) when you are making a generalization.

CORRECT: **Apples** are my favourite fruit.

INCORRECT: The apples are my favourite fruit.

CORRECT: **Gold** is a metal.

INCORRECT: The gold is a metal.

GUIDELINE: A singular count noun (e.g., *car*) is always preceded by:

- An article (**a / an** or **the**): e.g. I drove **a car**. / I drove **the car**.
- OR **This / that**: e.g. I drove I drove **that car**.
- OR A possessive noun: e.g. I drove **his car**.

INCORRECT: I drove car