

SPECIAL CASES IN THE USE OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

To decide if you should use the word *the*, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Is the noun indefinite (unspecified) or definite (specific)?

The general rule states that the first mention of a noun is indefinite and all subsequent references to this noun are definite and take *the*:

A man is walking down a road. There is a dog with *the* man.

The second mention may be a synonym:

Combine butter, sugar and eggs. Add flour to *the* mixture.

First (indefinite) mention requires *a* or *an* for a singular count noun, no article for a plural or non-count noun. Second mention makes *the* correct for both count and non-count nouns:

A growing plant must have water and minerals. *The* plant must also have sunlight. *The* minerals must include nitrates and *the* water must not be saline.

Three **special groups of nouns** are considered definite in reference even if they have not been mentioned in the preceding sentence or clause.

a) The first group consists of nouns which refer to **shared knowledge of the situation or context**.

For example, in Canada you can say

The Prime Minister will arrive tomorrow

because there is only one Prime Minister in Canada, and so it is clear to whom you are referring. Similarly, if there is only one hospital in the town, you can say

He's been working in *the* hospital for two years.

But you couldn't say this in Toronto, where there are many hospitals. You would have to name the particular hospital in your first reference to it:

He's been working at Toronto General Hospital for two years. He says *the* hospital is in a financial mess.

b) The second group consists of nouns referring to **unique objects**:

e.g., the sun/the earth/the Pope/the sky/the equator

c) **Superlative adjectives and unique adjectives** form the third group. Because there can be only one of these (only one of a series can be the tallest or the best or the first), they take the definite article:

Mexico City is *the* most populous city in the world.

I enjoyed *the* first part, but I was disappointed at *the* end.

She is *the* principal researcher.

2. Is the noun modified?

a) **Premodification:** If the noun is preceded by one of the following-- this/that/these/those/some/any/each/every/no/none/my/mine

do not use the definite article.

e.g., the red books/some red books/no red book/his red books/each red book

b) Postmodification: if the noun is followed by a relative clause (*who/which/that*) or a prepositional phrase (*of/in/to...*), **it is made definite and takes the definite article.**

The man who lives next door is Chinese.

We take *the* regular collection of garbage for granted.

The journey to Vancouver takes three days by train.

No one expected *the* results that were found.

EXCEPTION: collective nouns take the indefinite article:

a box of matches/a deck of cards/a bar of soap/a herd of cows.

3. Is the noun generic?

Generic reference is used when one refers to a whole group or class, to generalize about all possible members of a group. There are five patterns one can use:

a) no article PLUS plural count noun:

*It's astonishing what *gymnasts* can do.*

b) no article PLUS noncount noun:

Love can cause a lot of suffering.

c) indefinite article PLUS singular count noun:

*It's astonishing what *a gymnast* can do.*

[This pattern cannot be used to discuss the location or existence of something/someone.

You cannot say *A lion lives in Africa*. You must use pattern (a) or (d)].

d) definite article PLUS singular count noun:

*It's astonishing what *the gymnast* can do.*

e) definite article PLUS plural nationality noun:

The Chinese have an ancient culture.

Pattern (a) is most common in colloquial English; pattern (d) is frequently used in academic writing.

Sample Corrections of Sentences

“ paper based system is very time consuming and error prone.”

X *A paper based system...* Use **a** if there are many such systems and you are referring to one of them.

X *The paper based system...* Use **the** if there is only one such system in existence.

X *Paper based systems...* Use the plural if there are many such systems and you are referring to all of them.

“EDI can suffer more from ____ breakdown than the manual system.”

- X *EDI can suffer more from a breakdown ... Use a if the type of breakdown has not been specified or is immaterial.*
- X *EDI can suffer more from the breakdown ... Use the only if you have previously specified which type of breakdown this is.*
- X *EDI can suffer more from breakdowns ... Use the plural if there are many types of breakdowns and all of them can occur.*

“Organizations should be ready for ____ increased workload.”

- X *Organizations should be ready for an increased workload. Use a if there will be only one type of workload change, but you don't know what kind.*
- X *Organizations should be ready for the increased workload. Use the if the increase is specific.*
- X *Organizations should be ready for increased workloads. Use the plural if there are many types of increased workloads.*

“It is ____ museum's task to explore contemporary culture.”

- X *It is a museum's task... Use a if you are referring to any museum.*
- X *It is the museum's task... Use the if you are referring to one specific museum.*

Special Uses of Articles

a) Proper nouns. Proper nouns, because they are the names of people or places, are already specific and so do not need to be made more specific by the definite article. So we say “John,” not “the John,” and “Canada,” not “the Canada.” (There are one or two anomalous usages in place names: e.g., “the Netherlands,” but “Holland.”) This rule explains why we say “Boyle's Law,” not “the Boyle's Law,” and “Planck's constant” but not “the Planck's constant.” Sometimes, however, a proper noun is used as an adjective, and adjectives **do not** affect the decision to use the article with the noun. You must look at the noun in order to know whether or not to use the definite article.

- X *Japan's financial problem — Japan is a proper noun. No article.*
- X *the Japanese financial problem — Japanese is an adjective. Look at the noun to decide if there should be an article: problem is general and must be made specific by using “the.”*
- X *Japanese financial problems — Japanese is an adjective. Look at the noun. It is plural, so refers to all problems in general. No article.*
- X *Smith's book on Japan — Smith is the proper name of the person. No article.*
- X *the Smith book on Japan — Smith is used as an adjective modifying the noun book. Book is general, and must be made specific by using the article. (If the name is possessive, it is a proper noun. If not, it is acting as an adjective.)*

b) Media and communications:

Use a noun PLUS definite article to refer to **systems** of communication and the mass media, in contrast to the actual machine of communications. *The telephone is the system of communication; a telephone is the actual physical machine.*

The newspapers are all in agreement on the latest financial disaster.

[exception: *television* usually has no article: *Did you see him on TV?*]

c) Means of transportation:

Use the definite article to refer to the whole transport system, rather than to an individual vehicle:

How long does it take on *the bus*?

The subway is quicker.

[if you use the construction "by PLUS means of transport," there is no article: *I go by subway*].

d) Forms of entertainment:

To refer to a form of entertainment in general, use the definite article:

I enjoy seeing *the ballet*.

To refer to a particular event, use the indefinite article:

I saw *a good movie* last night.

e) Place/object or activity nouns:

Certain nouns refer to either a place/object or to an activity. When they refer to an activity, do **not** use the definite article:

ACTIVITY

I go to *bed* at 11 o'clock.

She went to *school* for many years.

Many families eat *dinner* together.

I shower before *breakfast*.

They are at *church*.

She is in *class*.

OBJECT

Don't jump on *the bed*.

The school was too small.

The dinner was delicious.

The breakfast was delicious.

The church is very old.

The class is in Room 102

f) Directions:

Nouns indicating direction do not take the definite article:

Go two blocks *south* and turn *left*.

[exception: nouns indicating political divisions take the definite article:

She is on *the left* of the party.]

g) Periods of time:

Names of decades, centuries and historic periods take the definite article, as they are a form of unique reference:

The 1960s were a time of student rebellion.