English Article Use: when to use “a,” “an,” and “the”

Is your noun countable or uncountable?

UNCOUNTABLE

Any of the uncountable noun

Use the noun with NO articles.

Ex1: Drinking WATER has many benefits.

Ex2: LOVE is a strong emotion.

Ex3: THE WATER is blue.

One specific uncountable noun

Use “the,” particularly when that noun is part of a clause used to define something specific.

Ex2: We examined THE WATER bordering the town.

NB: Remember to use “the” in the structure: THE Noun1 = of = Noun2. E.g., THE heart of the city; THE extent of the damage.

COUNTABLE

Is the noun, generally?

Countable noun, generally?

ONE member of that countable noun

Use “a” or “an” with that noun.

Ex1: I want A CAR.

Ex2: A VIRUS could have infected this specimen.

Ex3: COLORS can affect our emotions.

Ex2: SCIENTISTS have been researching this issue for decades.

ALL members of the noun, generally

Use the plural, no articles.

Ex1: THE ELEPHANT is a large mammal.

Ex2: THE HARPS are difficult instruments to learn.

The countable noun as a WHOLE GROUP

Use “the”.

Ex1: THE SUN grows hotter with each day.

If yes, use “a” or “an” when you first talk about that noun. Then use “the” for all subsequent mentions.

Ex2: AN EXCEPTION occurred when we ran the program. We are still trying to analyze THE EXCEPTION.

Specific member of that countable noun?

Yes

Will the mention of this noun be new, unknown or never heard before by your audience?

If yes, use “a” or “an”.

Ex1: We noticed A DEVIATION in the pattern. THE DEVIATION was unexpected.

Ex2: THE modern PERIODIC TABLE was published by Mendeleev in 1869.

No (see “Countable noun, generally?”)