



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.

Example: **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:

- a. What colour is **a banana** (generic noun)? **A banana** (generic noun) is yellow.
- b. 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