

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Self-help Modules in Technical Writing for Non-native Speaking Students

by Gerson/Morris

ARTICLES

with COUNT NOUNS and NON-COUNT NOUNS

The ARTICLES (the, an, a) are troublemakers for people whose first language is not English. The problem with articles is threefold: a) which one (the, an, a) to use before a noun, b) with which nouns they must be used, and c) when they should be omitted. Before you can choose the correct article or choose to omit it, you must know something about the noun it precedes. Specifically, you must know if the noun indicates something which you may count, such as a tree, or something which cannot be counted, such as nature. Then you must know if the noun is definite (the tree in my backyard) or indefinite, unspecified and general (For a bird, a tree is a home.).

I. The Articles: THE, A, AN

I bought a pen and pencil this morning.

The pen is black and the pencil is yellow.

a. The article *a* is used in the first sentence to indicate that the pen and the pencil which the speaker is talking about are being mentioned for the first time and that they are not identified.

b. In the second sentence, the article *the* is used to show that the nouns *pen* and *pencil* have been identified. In other words, we know which particular pen and pencil the speaker/writer is referring to.

Sources: English Sentence Structure by Robert Krohn, University of Michigan Press, 1971.

Modern English by William E. Rutherford, Vol. 1, 2nd Edition, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

Language and Life in the U.S.A. by Gladys G. Doty and Janet Ross (Vol. 1 "Communication in English"), 3rd Edition, Harper and Row, 1973.

NOTE: The example shows that a noun can be identified in a previous sentence. In the sentences below, the noun is identified by the phrase which follows:

The book on my desk is black.

The music of Brahms is majestic.

I like the ring that you are wearing.

(Phrases such as these above are usually sufficient to establish identification, but not always.)

Sometimes the things referred to are understood from the situation and are therefore identified. For example, if I say, "Is the door closed?" you know that I am asking about the door of this classroom.

The indefinite articles *a/an* are also used in sentences of description and when an unidentified specimen is introduced.

Helen is a student.

London is a city.

A and *an* are considered weak forms of *one*, which we use when we want to emphasize the number:

One student came late, not two.

I own one cat, not two.

OR

I own a cat, not a dog.

NOTE: *The* is not used with a) the names of persons, b) languages, c) most countries, d) streets, or e) the time of day.

EXAMPLES :

Mrs. Lin is a teacher.

We are going to see Dr. Smith today.

We are speaking English.

Chinese is an important language.

The Thames River is in England.

She comes to class at six o'clock.

EXCEPTIONS:

The Ohio River is in the United States.

the Dominican Republic

the Netherlands

the Azores

II. Using Articles with COUNT and NON-COUNT Nouns

"Yesterday I noticed a pain in my right arm."

"Where exactly was the pain?"

"It was in my elbow. "

"Do you feel pain in your other arm?"

Nouns in English fall into two categories: count nouns and non-count nouns. Count nouns indicate things that can be counted and made plural: one pen, two pens, etc. Non-count nouns are not counted and may include a) abstractions (truth, beauty), b) solid substances (soap, beef), c) liquids (milk, cream, tea), d) collections (architecture, clothing), e) natural phenomena (rain, heat, lightning), f) activities (farming, swimming, music).

Law is my profession.

Economics is my hobby.

I enjoy reading.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

"Honesty is the best policy."

Fish is low in calories, high in protein.

NOTE: "Uncountable nouns that are specified or identified are marked by *the*.

The economics of the Carter administration is hard to understand.

The beauty of that little girl is quite astonishing.

He has the honesty of a pawnbroker.

The fish in that restaurant is lousy.

The cream which I bought yesterday is already sour.

NOTE: Use *the* with proper names under special circumstances only.

General Stonewall Jackson	the general of the Eighth Army
America	the United States
Harvard University	the University of Kansas
Christmas	the Fourth of July.
<i>Othello</i>	the last play of Shakespeare

Geographical places:

Jupiter, Mars	the sun, the earth
Earth zones	the North Pole, the Equator
Asia, South America	
East Africa, West Germany	the Middle East, the Sahara Desert
Wake Island, Guam	the Bahamas, the Canary Islands
Fujiyama, Mt. Everest	the Andes, the Matterhorn
Lake Michigan	the Great Lakes, the Atlantic Ocean, the Black Sea, the Nile, the Mississippi River
Yellowstone Nat'l Park	
Waikiki Beach	
Park Avenue, Fourth St.	the Oakland Bay Bridge
Yankee Stadium	the Library of Congress, the Lyric Opera
Carnegie Hall	the Midland Theater
Windsor Palace	

III. Summary

Study the following chart of *a/an* and *the* with Count Nouns and Non-Count Nouns.

COUNT NOUN		NON-COUNT NOUNS
Singular	Plural	Singular (No Plural Form)}
a. Indefinite: a tree Definite: the tree	trees the trees	water the water in this city
b. Indefinite: a pencil Definite: the pencil	pencils the pencils	knowledge the knowledge a man can gain in a lifetime
c. Indefinite: a machine Definite: the machine	machines the machines	machinery the machinery at the new Ford factory
d. Indefinite: a photo album Definite: the photo album	photo albums the photo albums	electricity the electricity generated by this power plant

Notice the sentences built on these nouns and their articles:

1. First, the indefinite nouns in a) above.

A tree provides a home for many animals.

Trees provide homes for many animals.

Water is essential to all life forms.

Now, the definite nouns from a).

The tree **out back** is an oak.

The trees **on their farm** are old and majestic.

In Kansas City, the water is hard and full of minerals.

Notice that in the second group of sentences, the bold words make the nouns (tree, trees, water) definite and specific.

2. Second, the indefinite nouns from b).

Use a pencil to mark the answers on your answer sheet.

All students need pencils.

Some people are not interested in gaining knowledge.

Now, the definite nouns from b).

I used the pencil **that he used yesterday**.

All the pencils need to be sharpened. (assume you know which pencils)

The knowledge **a man can acquire in a lifetime** often depends on good fortune and hard work.

3. Third, the indefinite nouns from c).

There is a machine which can teach a monkey how to spell.

Machines are now a part of everyday life.

Machinery has changed since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

Now, the definite nouns from c).

The photocopying machine is broken.

The machines produced by Xerox are very expensive.

The machinery at the new Ford Factory will be able to manufacture hybrid cars.

Practice Exercise A

In the three (3) sentences above, underline the word or groups of words which definitise (make-the nouns definite) the nouns.

Practice Exercise B

Write six (6) sentences, three using the indefinite nouns from d) (a photo album, photo albums, electricity) and three sentences using definite nouns from d) (the photo album, the photo albums, the electricity generated).

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

Practice Exercise C

Underline the correct answers in the letter (Letter of Inquiry without reader benefit) below.

EXAMPLE: He ate (a, the) hot dog with relish and onions, not (a, the) one with catsup.

Date

Writer's Address

Mr. John Harvey
Director of Production
General Motors Assembly Division
Kansas City, Mo.

Dear Mr. Harvey:

Congratulations on your project of using (the, no article) robots in (a, the) automobile assembly plant. Your project has saved (a, no article) lot of money for (the, no article) Kansas City Division of General Motors. Because I am (an, a) Electrical Engineer, I would like to learn more about your project.

Probably, some information exchange could help us. So I am enclosing (an, a) microprocessor control system circuit which I designed. In return, could you please answer (the, no article) following questions:

1. Could (a, an) robot do all automobile assembly jobs?
2. How many robots do you use in your plant now?
3. Do you have any trouble with (the, a) electronic control system, which is installed in the robot?

You can use (no article, the) enclosed return envelope to reply, and please add any other information you wish. Congratulations again on your success. Any answer you can give me will be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Writer's Name

Practice Exercise D

Instructions: Circle the correct answers in the letter (Letter of Inquiry with reader benefit) below.

Date

Writer's Address

Mr. Harvey John
Director of Admissions
Kansas City Vocational School
Kansas City, Mo.

Dear Mr. John:

I would like to congratulate your school for having (a, an, the, no article) good computer technology program. It has helped many of your students find (a, an, the, no article) excellent jobs. In fact, (a, an, the, no article) acquaintance of mine, who graduated from your school, says your computer classes helped him get his job at Radio Shack.

Because I have just graduated from high school and I am interested in becoming (a, an, the, no article) computer programmer, I would like to know more about your computer classes. Would you please send me (a, an, the, no article) following information:

1. How long does it take to acquire (a, an, the, no article) degree in technology?
2. Are there any required tests for (a, an, the, no article) admission to your school?
3. How much is (a, an, the, no article) tuition?
4. What am I required to send along with (a, an, the, no article) application form?

I would appreciate it very much if you would send me (a, an, the, no article) requested information by the end of this month so that I can pursue my career goals.

Sincerely,

Writer's Name

Practice Exercise E

In the spaces below, write in the correct article (a, an, the) or leave the sentence as it is (no article needed).

The three main parts of the IBM #345 soldering iron are _____ handle, heating element, and tip.

HANDLE

The handle serves as _____ insulator against _____ intense heat of the tip and as _____ gripping surface for the operator.

HEATING ELEMENT

The heating element changes _____ electrical energy, transmitted from the wall outlet, into heat. It is made of _____ casing and a coil.

TIP

The stainless steel tip transfers heat from _____ heating coil to the junction to be soldered. One end of the tip is threaded so it can be screwed into _____ casing's socket to make contact with _____ heating core. The other end is beveled into two flat surfaces similar to those on the end of _____ screwdriver.

Source: Technical Report Writing Today, Steven Pauley, Houghton Mifflin.

Practice Exercise F

After reading the following Description through Partition, decide whether the underlined spaces need an article or not. If an article is needed, add it. If none is needed, leave the space blank.

_____ insulin syringe is composed of _____ plunger assembly and a barrel.

PLUNGER ASSEMBLY

_____ plunger assembly is used to push insulin through _____ barrel.

It is located at the top of _____ syringe and consists of _____ knob, stem, and _____ rubber cylinder, all of which are molded together.

Knob

Located at the top of the plunger assembly, _____ plastic knob is gripped to move the plunger. The knob is _____ smooth disk having _____ diameter of 3/8 inch and _____ thickness of 1/32 inch.

Stem

_____ stem allows the rubber cylinder, attached to the bottom of the stem, to extend to the bottom of the barrel when the plunger is fully closed. This forces the insulin out of the barrel. The stem is made of _____ plastic and has _____ ribs scribed along its length. It measures 3 1/4 inches long and 1/8 inch in diameter.

Rubber Cylinder

_____ rubber cylinder, attached to the lower end of the stem, fits snugly into the barrel, allowing no air or foreign particles to enter the insulin. The cylinder is 1/4-inch tall and has _____ 3/16-inch diameter.

BARREL

The barrel of the syringe holds the insulin prior to its injection into the body. A handle is molded to the top of the barrel, providing better gripping of the syringe during injection. The handle is 1/2-inch long 3/8-inch wide, and 1/8-inch thick. _____ smooth, clear plastic barrel is marked off in cubic centimeter intervals. This 3 3/8-inch tall barrel has _____ diameter of 3/16 inch. _____ 1/64-inch opening at the bottom of _____ barrel allows for insertion of the needle.

Source: Technical Report Writing Today, Steven Pauley, Houghton Mifflin.

Practice Exercises G

After deciding whether the following bold nouns are either count or non-count, add an "s" where pluralization is needed.

MEMO

Date:

To: Subordinate

From: Supervisor

Re: Inefficient Power Usage

Use the following **information**() to correct excessive power usage. The four **generator**() consume less **electricity**() when operating at 300 RPM. These three **machine**() must be kept in better working order to insure correct power usage. To do so,

1. the **equipment**() must be oiled regularly.
2. all fan **belt**() must be checked periodically.
3. the three **filter**() must be inspected every week.

If we keep these pieces of **machinery**() oiled and clean, our **generator**() will work more efficiently, cutting power usage, thereby saving the company lots of **money**().

Practice Exercise H

Read the following Analysis by Partition. 1) Decide whether the blank spaces need an article. If an article (a, an, the) is needed, add it; if no article is needed, leave it as is. 2) Decide whether the words ending in a parentheses need to be pluralized. If an "s" is needed, add it; if no "s" is needed, leave it as is.

HOBBIES

1. Building

_____ building is _____ specialized hobby for _____ handy people. Engineer () and technicians can build electronic system (), such as radio (), amplifiers and electronic game (). Electronic () is interesting because of _____ many component () available at reasonable price (). _____ radio or _____ electronic game () can be built for under \$25.

Carpenter () can build furniture, like desk (), tables, chairs, etc. Such a hobby is more expensive because _____ tool () required cost more than those needed for building electronic () games. Hammers, nail (), wood (), varnish, chisels, sandpaper, etc., are more costly than soldering irons.

2. Sport ()

Many people enjoy watching sports, like football and baseball while other () enjoy sports by playing game () like tennis or by jogging. Again cost is a factor.

3. Movies

There are many type () of movie (), ranging from Walt Disney cartoon () to love stories, drama, comedies and war movies. These can be seen on T.V. or at movie theatre ().

Home T.V. movies are cheaper than _____ movie () you see at _____ theatre, even if you buy any of _____ additional channels, like HBO or Cinemax. _____ channel () for HBO in Overland Park is 2B. HBO and Cable cost \$35.00 _____ month (equal to paying for five movie ticket () at a theatre).

Theatre movies cost approximately \$6.50 _____ ticket, but you also pay for drink (), popcorn (), gas for cars, and baby sitters. _____ price can really soar.