

Appendix Two:

Articles in Academic Writing

Three of the most common words in the English language are also three of the most difficult to use. We are referring to the articles *a*, *an*, and *the*. We will not attempt here to give you every rule of article use in English, but we will provide you with a quick review of some basic rules to guide you in your choice of *a*, *an*, *the*, or \emptyset (no article needed).

1. Countability

Before deciding if you should use an article, you should determine whether the noun in question is countable (count) or uncountable (non-count) and whether it is generic (representative or symbolic). Count nouns can take the plural; non-count nouns cannot, or can only do so under special circumstances. Let us first take a look at specific nouns and countability. We will take a look at generic use later.

TASK ONE

Mark the following nouns as either count (C) or non-count (NC).

behavior	___	money	___
complication	___	problem	___
crisis	___	progress	___
device	___	proposal	___
discrepancy	___	research	___
energy	___	reception	___
equipment	___	research project	___

Determining whether a noun is countable may not be as easy as it seems. First, you cannot tell whether a noun is countable simply by looking at it. Some nouns that you intuitively think can be counted may not be countable. Money, for example, can be counted; however, the word *money* is a non-count noun. Second, a noun that is countable in one language may not be countable in another and vice versa. *Information*, for example, is a non-count noun in English but a count noun in most of its European equivalents. The following are usually non-count nouns in English.

Names for languages—*Chinese, Korean, French, Arabic* . . .

Names for areas of study—*physics, biology, economics* . . .

Names for solids—*coal, steel, marble* . . .

Names for liquids—*water, nitric acid, oil* . . .

Names for gases—*oxygen, hydrogen, methane* . . .

Names for powders—*salt, sugar, sand* . . .

Third, although you may have learned that nouns are either count or non-count, this is not the whole story. There are quite a number of nouns that can be either. These can be referred to as *double nouns*. There may even be considerable differences in meaning between a count noun and its non-count counterpart. Table 25 lists some double nouns.

TABLE 25. Double Nouns

Non-Count	Count
analysis (in general)	an analysis (a particular one)
calculation (in general)	a calculation (a particular one)
diamond (the hard substance)	a diamond (a precious stone)
grain (in general), i.e., cereal	a grain (a particular one), i.e., a grain of salt
science (in general)	a science (a particular one)
sound (in general)	a sound (a particular one)

An important group of nouns in this category refers to concepts that can be measured or quantified. Examples of these are *temperature*, *pressure*, *voltage*, *growth*, *density*, and *velocity*. Can you describe the difference between *temperature* and *a temperature*?

A thermometer measures temperature.

Temperature is expressed in degrees.

A temperature of over 120°C was recorded.

The patient ran a high temperature for several days.

Fourth, some nouns that are non-count nouns in everyday English may be count nouns in technical English. Can you explain the difference in usage between the italicized nouns in the following sentences?

Rice is a staple food around the world.

A *rice* that can resist certain types of diseases should be introduced to the farmers of the region.

Steel is critical for the construction of skyscrapers.

The use of *a* light-weight *steel* would improve fuel efficiency.

There are at least two possible explanations for the difference. One is that the second sentence of each set involves a highly specialized use of the term that would most likely only be used by experts in the field. For example, while most non-experts would make a distinction between *rice* and *wheat* or between *steel* and *aluminum*, they would not necessarily distinguish between different types of rice or steel. Experts, however, can and do. Another reason may be for purposes of conciseness. It is simply more efficient for experts to talk of *steels* rather than *different types of steel*. (However, we recommend that you do not shift non-count nouns to count nouns unless you have seen examples from your field of study.)

2. The Indefinite Article and Ø

Once you have determined what type of noun you are using, you can then make some further decisions regarding your choice (or omission) of an article. As you know, *a(n)* indicates that the noun is any single countable item, rather than a specific one. *A* is used before consonant sounds, while *an* is used before vowel sounds. Note that sound, not spelling, is the criterion. This explains why we write *an uprising* but *a university* and *a lead battery* but *an LED display*.

A(n) is typically used with the first mention of a singular countable noun, but not always. There are a number of linguistic contexts that require the use of *the*. (See Section 3, The Definite Article.)

Usually, no article (Ø) is necessary for the first mention of a plural or a non-count noun where none of the special conditions for definite article use apply. (See Section 3.)

3. The Definite Article

The use of the definite article is far more problematic than the use of the indefinite because the definite article is used in a number of different ways. The most important of these, however, is to specify a particular noun, to make clear that reference is being made to a particular singular or plural noun. The definite article should be used in the following contexts.

- Second mention (either explicit or implicit)
 - a. The surface is covered by *a thin oxide film*. *The film* protects the surface from corrosion.
 - b. A very lightweight car was developed, but *the vehicle* performed poorly in crash tests.
 - c. A new computer was purchased to complete the process, but *the hard drive* was damaged.
- Superlatives or ordinals
 - a. *The most-controlled therapy* yielded the best results.
 - b. *The first studies* were conducted in early 1993.
 - c. *The last security conference* was termed a success.
- Specifiers (e.g., *same, sole, only, chief, principal . . .*)
 - a. *The same subjects* were retested at two-week intervals.
 - b. *The only research* previously done in this area yielded mixed results.
 - c. *The principal causes* of the disaster have yet to be discovered.

- Shared knowledge or unique reference
 - a. *The sun* rises in the east and sets in the west.
 - b. *The oxygen balance* in the atmosphere is maintained by photosynthesis.
 - c. *The stars* are fueled by fusion reactions.
- *Of* phrases or other forms of postmodification (but not with first mention of partitive² *of* phrases such as *a molecule of oxygen*, *a layer of silicon*, or *a piece of information*)
 - a. *The behavior of this species* varies.
 - b. *The price of gold* fluctuates.
 - c. *The results of the investigation* were inconclusive.
- Partitive *of* phrases with plurals
 - a. *None of the projects* was satisfactory.
 - b. *Some of the subjects* had adverse reactions.
 - c. *All of the questionnaires* were returned.
- Names of theories, effects, devices, scales, and so on modified by a proper name used as an *adjective*
 - a. *the Doppler* effect
 - b. *the Heisenberg* uncertainty principle
 - c. *the Hubble* telescope
 - d. *the Kelvin* scale

Note, however, that when a proper name is used in the *possessive form*, no article is used.

- a. Coulomb's law
- b. Einstein's theory of relativity
- c. Broca's area
- d. Wegener's hypothesis

² A partitive phrase is a construction that denotes part of a whole.