As an adult learner of English as a second language, you know it’s a challenge to use articles a, an, and the correctly. Since these little words refer to nouns and noun phrases, you can master them faster if you understand nouns thoroughly – especially the difference between count and non-count nouns.

### Count and Non-Count Nouns

In English, **count nouns** (more precisely, nouns in their countable meanings) are people, places, things, activities, or events that can be either singular or plural. Such nouns can be counted with numbers or other modifiers that indicate singular or plural number:

**SINGULAR:** 1 cup, a cup, each cup, every cup, this cup  
**PLURAL:** 2 cups, several cups, many cups, these cups

**Non-count nouns** (more precisely, nouns in their uncountable meanings) cannot be counted with numbers or other words that indicate singular and plural. Some nouns are never countable in English, such as information, advice, evidence, and news:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-count Nouns</th>
<th>Count Nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td>evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “an information”</td>
<td>not “an evidence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “every information”</td>
<td>not “a number of evidences”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “2 informations”</td>
<td>not “15 evidences”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “many informations”</td>
<td>not “several evidences”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advice</td>
<td>news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “an advice”</td>
<td>not “a news”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “each advice”</td>
<td>not “a few news”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “3 advices”</td>
<td>not “5 news”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not “multiple advices”</td>
<td>not “hundreds of news”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In English, “one information, two informations…” is incorrect. Notice that article a (or an – used before a vowel sound) cannot be used with non-count nouns. This makes sense, since a/an means “one,” and non-count nouns cannot be counted.

You may wonder why the seemingly tangible noun “evidence” and the plural-looking “news” (which is actually singular in English) are non-count. You may say that the words for “information” or “advice” in other languages can be counted, so why not in English? Good questions!

Tradition may determine some count vs. non-count distinctions. But logic plays a role as well. The patterns on the next pages will help you recognize these logical aspects. *Note that many nouns can be used both ways: count and non-count.*
What Makes a Count Noun Countable?

Count nouns usually have one or more of the following characteristics:

-1. **Limited in space** – a tangible object or place that has boundaries; a thing with a particular form or type of form you can imagine quickly and easily:

  - a pen, many pens
  - a beach, a number of beaches
  - a computer, 20 computers
  - an apple, several apples

-2. **Limited in time or extent** – an action, activity, problem, or event; a moment or period that has a *beginning* and an *end*:

  - a party, a lot of parties
  - a project, many projects
  - an excursion, several excursions
  - an infection, multiple infections

-3. **Limited in function** – an individual unit, member, element or example of a larger concept, category, class, or idea:

  - a word, two words
  - a language, several languages
  - an adjective, many adjectives
  - an average, some averages

Notice that the four non-count nouns introduced on page 1 – *information, advice, evidence, news* – do not have what it takes to be count nouns: **limits**. Information, advice, evidence, and news are understood in English as general ideas and broad categories. They are not limited or particular enough to be countable...according to the traditions and logic of English grammar.

What Makes a Non-Count Noun Uncountable?

Nouns in their uncountable meanings are usually one or more of the following:

-1. **Abstract idea or general concept** with no particular form or boundaries:

  - adventure, love, competition, creativity, nature, beauty, eternity

-2. **Natural phenomenon, condition, or quality**:

  - light, life, thunder, weather, green
-3- **Material or substance** - solid, liquid, or gas that can take various forms/shapes or occupy various containers:

leather, cheese, rice, paper, ice, water, air, oxygen

-4- **General activity** - an idea of action, work, play, sport - that can occupy various periods of time, with no particular beginning or end time:

coordination, exercise, basketball, marketing, sleep, labor

-5- **Broad category** that includes many elements or examples (note: these individual elements or examples are usually count nouns):

- furniture (includes chairs, desks, tables, cabinets, and other count nouns)
- clothing (includes pants, shirts, dresses, jackets, and other count nouns)
- money (includes coins, bills, dollars, cents, yen, euros, other count nouns)
- music (includes symphonies, sonatas, songs, raps, and other count nouns)

**How to Quantify Non-Count Nouns**

To indicate quantity of a non-count noun, you can use words such as *little, a little, not much, and a great deal of*:

- little information
- a little advice
- not much evidence
- a great deal of news

Some quantity modifiers can be used with both count and non-count nouns:

- some cups, some information
- a lot of cups, a lot of advice
- most cups, most evidence (or: most of the cups, most of the evidence)
- all cups, all news (or: all [of] the cups, all [of] the news)

You can count concrete, limited instances of non-count nouns by using phrases such as *a piece of or two pieces of* (notice that words like *piece* are count nouns):

- a piece of equipment*
- two pieces of machinery*
- three articles of clothing*
- four glasses of beer
- five games of tennis

- a bit of advice
- a cup of water
- a bolt of lightning
- a work of art
- a pinch of salt

*Specific pieces of non-count nouns are usually countable, so phrases like those above can be replaced with specific count nouns such as *a computer, two centrifuges, three shirts.*
Many Nouns Do Both Jobs

Many nouns in English can be either countable (when expressing a limited or particular meaning) or uncountable (when expressing an abstract or general meaning). Nouns that are typically non-count may often be counted if they express a particular instance or example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NON-COUNT</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light is essential for most plants.</td>
<td>I saw a light in the distance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We bought some ice cream for dessert.</td>
<td>She ate an ice cream at the circus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People admired his spirit of adventure.</td>
<td>We had an adventure last Saturday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They’re both studying art in school.</td>
<td>Cooking is an art.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition drives innovation.</td>
<td>A competition will be held next week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She loves life.</td>
<td>He had a long life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You need to get more sleep.</td>
<td>Did you have a good sleep?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-count nouns can become count nouns when they indicate a specific type, variety, unit, or element within a category (often combined with adjectives):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NON-COUNT</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The best shoes are made of leather.</td>
<td>We’re looking for a higher-quality leather, so next month we’ll visit a fashion show featuring various leathers from all over Italy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine goes well with cheese.</td>
<td>Our country produces several excellent wines and hundreds of cheeses you might not be aware of.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conversely, count nouns are often non-count when they refer to general activities, concepts, or categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNT</th>
<th>NON-COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You attended a prestigious graduate school.</td>
<td>Graduate school was tough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large-company stocks soared on Wall Street.</td>
<td>Investing in stock can be profitable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our three divisions offer three distinct services.</td>
<td>We deliver excellent service.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using Articles + Nouns Correctly

Understanding count vs. non-count nouns will help you use articles correctly. First, let’s examine the use of article *a/an*. Remember: *a/an* means “one,” so it can count a single noun (singular count noun) and cannot be used with a non-count noun:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A/an + Singular Count Noun</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
<th>A/an + Non-count Noun is Incorrect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a cup</td>
<td>a) one cup</td>
<td>a furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) any cup</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an idea</td>
<td>a) one idea</td>
<td>an equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) any idea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A/an* can refer to either *one* or *any*:

- **1- One**
  
  I’ll lend you a pen.
  She bought a new book.
  I saw a clown riding a unicycle today.
  He ate an apple before class.

In the sentences above, the speaker/writer knows or understands the noun as a particular individual, but the listener/reader does not. For example, “a pen” refers to “one pen; one of those things we call pens.” The speaker/writer may – or may not – be thinking of a specific pen, but he/she knows the listener/reader does not know which particular pen.

- **2- Any**
  
  Please write with a pen. (similar to “pens” – if addressing a group)
  He thinks a book is better than a friend. (similar to “books” & “friends”)
  A unicycle is hard to ride. (similar to “unicycles”)
  An apple has almost no vitamin C. (similar to “apples”)

In these sentences, the speaker/writer refers to the noun in general, the concept of that noun, any such noun. In the example above, “a pen” refers to “any pen you happen to have or can find.” The speaker/writer is not referring to a particular pen.

**Singular Count Nouns MUST be "Marked"**

In English, a singular count noun like “pen” does not lead a solitary existence! Don’t write or say something like "I need pen"! In standard sentences*, such nouns must be “marked” with:

- an article (*a/an, the*): A pen, the pen
- a demonstrative adjective or question word: This pen, that pen, which pen, what pen
- a possessive adjective: My pen, Lloyd’s pen, whose pen
- a number or determiner: One pen, each pen, every pen, no pen, any pen, another pen, either pen, neither pen

*As opposed to headlines, headings, bullet lists, and other cases permitting abbreviated grammar
Definite Article *The*

Like the words *this, that, these, and those*, the article *the* indicates particular nouns. *The* refers to a specific or unique noun in a context known, understood, or imagined by both the speaker/writer and the reader/listener. *The* can be used with singular count nouns, plural count nouns, and non-count nouns:

**The + Singular Count Noun**

Do you have the pen that I gave you yesterday?
(similar to “that pen”; adjective clause “that you gave us” identifies the pen specifically, uniquely)

The pen in my bag is even better.
(similar to “this pen”; prepositional phrase “in my bag” identifies the pen specifically, uniquely)

I couldn’t finish the exercise.
(similar to “that exercise”; implied adjective clause: “that you gave us”)

**The + Plural Count Noun**

Do you have the pens that I gave you yesterday?
(similar to “those pens”; adjective clause “that I gave you” identifies the pens specifically, uniquely)

The pens in my bag are even better.
(similar to “these pens”; prepositional phrase “in my bag” identifies the pens specifically, uniquely)

Did you complete all the exercises?
(similar to “those exercises”; implied adjective clause: “that I assigned ”)

**The + Non-Count Noun**

Do you have the paper that I gave you yesterday?
(similar to “that paper”; adjective clause “that I gave you” identifies the paper specifically, uniquely)

The paper in this box is even better.
(similar to “this paper”; prepositional phrase “in this box” identifies the paper specifically, uniquely)

Do you see the lightning?
(similar to “that lightning”; implied prepositional phrase: “over there”)

She’s healthy because of all the exercise she does.
(similar to “that exercise”; adjective clause “[that] she does” identifies the exercise uniquely)
In the preceding examples, notice that adjective clauses such as “that I gave you yesterday” and prepositional phrases such as “in my bag” are enough to identify nouns specifically and uniquely for both speaker/writer and reader/listener. However, such identifying clauses and phrases are often unnecessary; context usually makes the use of article the clear.

**Unique, one-of-a-kind** nouns often require the, which indicates the **one and only** noun, name, or title:

Thomas Jefferson is the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Here, the uniqueness of “the man” and “the Declaration” is established through both context - "the man" = that particular man; "the Declaration" = that specific document - and grammar - adjective clause "who wrote…" and prepositional phrase "of Independence" are typical uniqueness markers, as we saw in the sentences on the previous page.

Be careful NOT to consider **every** noun marked by an adjective clause or prepositional phrase unique enough to deserve its own definite article! Here are some examples in which such nouns are indefinite and unspecific - at least for the reader/listener:

David is a man who likes outdoor sports.
(NOT “the man” – adjective clause “who likes…” is not strong enough to establish David as “the man,” since there are many men who like outdoor sports. This sentence simply states that Dave is one of those many men who like outdoor sports – one among many)

New York is a city with a growing number of green spaces.
(NOT “the city” – prepositional phrase "with a growing number of green spaces" is not strong enough to establish New York as “the city," since we can assume there are other cities with growing numbers of green spaces. This sentence simply states that New York is one of those cities or that type of city)

The + Common Ideas/Things

The also refers to common concepts, aspects, elements, features, and institutions of everyday life and experience. These nouns are understood by both speaker/writer and reader/listener; they do not need to be identified by adjective clauses or prepositional phrases.

When I woke up, the sun was already high in the sky.
The weather is affected by small changes in the atmosphere.
She usually wakes up early in the morning and goes to bed early in the evening.
I have to go to the bank, the library, and the grocery store.
The police are coming now. (note: the noun police is always plural)
Tonight we’re going to the movies.
Kids in the suburbs like to play in the street.
Let’s go to the zoo or the park tomorrow!
When did you see the ocean for the first time?
However, note that these same words can be used in **indefinite** references:

A bank is usually a safe place to keep your money.
("a bank" = any bank)

Police responded to an emergency call last night
("police" = some police officers; **no article is necessary** in most **indefinite references** to plural or non-count nouns)

I love movies.
("movies" in general; **no article is necessary** in most **general statements** about plural or non-count nouns)

Weather is always a factor in making travel decisions.
("weather" in general; **no article is necessary** in most **general statements** about plural or non-count nouns)

We spent a beautiful morning and a memorable evening together.
("a beautiful morning" = one beautiful morning; the **first mention** of a noun by a speaker/writer is **usually indefinite** because it is being introduced to the listener/reader)

They go to a grocery store in Harlem.
("a grocery store" = one grocery store that the listener/reader is not expected to be familiar with; as in the previous sentence, the first mention of such a noun is usually indefinite)

They’re building a zoo on a street near my apartment.
(first mention of these nouns)

These mountains used to be sedimentary layers on the bottom of a prehistoric ocean.
(first mention of "a prehistoric ocean")

**The + Representative Noun**

In some generalizations, the refers to a noun as a representative of all members of its type, class, or category. This is especially common in instructions and explanations:

To reach leaves on tall trees, the elephant evolved a long nose and the giraffe evolved a long neck. ("the elephant" = that animal we call/classify "elephant")

Many children learn to play the piano, but few learn to play the saxophone.

The corporation is a legal structure that protects the owners from personal liability.
("the owners" = any such owners - the owners of any such structure; also common: "its owners")

The last sentence above could also be expressed with **indefinite nouns**:

A corporation is a legal structure that protects owners from personal liability.
The + Names and Titles

Most names and titles in English do not include the (see important exceptions below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person/Place/Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Cargill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blair House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Everest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold Mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XYZ Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42nd Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
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<td>Brooklyn</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>42nd Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology 101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EXCEPTIONS

1- Named groups, organizations, and institutions often include the, especially when the last word in the name is a common noun such as company, association, society, hotel, or family:
   - The Beatles
   - The XYZ Company
   - The International Stargazers Association
   - The Humane Society
   - The Piper Hotel (also: The Piper; sometimes: The Hotel Piper)
   - The Bush family (also: The Bushes; sometimes: The Family Bush)
   - The Wall Street Journal

2- Countries that consider themselves groups or collections of smaller parts often include the:
   - The United Kingdom (group of countries)
   - The United States (group of states)
   - The Philippines (group of islands)
   - The Netherlands (group of “lands”)
   - The People’s Republic of China (group of nationalities)
   - The Czech Republic (group of people united politically)

3- Names that include of usually include the:
   - The Republic of Korea
   - The University of Oregon
   - The Queen of England
   - The Prince of Wales

4- Names of large geographical features (oceans, seas, rivers, deserts, and mountain ranges) usually include the:
   - The Pacific Ocean (also: The Pacific)
   - The Mediterranean Sea (also: The Mediterranean)
   - The Amazon River (also: The Amazon)
   - The Sahara Desert (also: The Sahara)
   - The Rocky Mountains (also: The Rockies*)

   *Names of mountain ranges that normally do not include the word mountains still include the: the Alps; the Andes

5- The appears in some names by choice, tradition, or various historical reasons:
   - The George Washington University (the included by choice and tradition)
   - The White House (the included by choice and tradition)
   - The Bronx (the included for historical reason)