

# English Articles

## How to Teach and Learn Them

Articles in English are some of the most difficult aspects of the language to teach and learn. More than one study and plenty of anecdotes prove the challenge of learning and teaching articles, especially for and to native speakers of non-Indo-European languages such as Korean.

Step 1. The trick is to master the English language notions of nouns and referential specificity.

**Nouns:** With respect to nouns, students of English must learn to differentiate the following:

1. Common nouns, which divide into two kinds:
  - a. count nouns and their forms (i.e., singular / plural)
  - b. non-count nouns (or “mass” nouns) and their forms.
2. Proper nouns and their forms.

**Referential specificity:** With respect to referential specificity, students of English must learn to differentiate the following:

1. Specific reference, which divide into two kinds:
  - a. definiteness
  - b. indefiniteness.
2. Generic reference.

Step 2. Once (or as) students master these two notions, then they can learn articles (and other “determiners” or “noun markers”). The trick, then, is to recognize how “the” and “a, an” and “no article” signal referential specificity for nouns. That is, all nouns have either a specific-definite sense, or a specific-indefinite sense, or a generic sense.

Step 3. After learning about articles as “noun markers,” then a student can learn other determiners such as numbers (i.e., “one,” “six-thousand”), “some,” “many,” “a lot,” “few,” and “a few.” Lots of textbooks use charts to help students recognize these classes and forms (see the chart below).

Step 4. After recognition comes drill. Textbooks and online tutorials will drill the ability to distinguish the various forms.

Step 5. Recognition and drill comes before using articles in writing, including the process of “editing” or “correcting.” Work in writing usually comes before correct speaking. This process seems to work best.

In summary, a five-step sequence works best in learning how to use English articles: First, learn the noun system in English, including referential specificity. Second, learn articles as markers of such nouns. Third, recognize other determiners. Fourth, drill the analytical knowledge. Fifth, apply the knowledge to writing. Lastly, begin to apply the knowledge to speaking.

The following chart will help students recognize the three classes of nouns and the three kinds of referential specificity.

<b>Common Nouns: Countable</b>		
Generic reference (-- zero article)	Specific indefinite reference (a, an, indefinite article)	Specific definite reference (the, definite article)
<u>Singular</u> N/A	<u>Singular</u> I ate <b>an</b> apple this morning. <b>An</b> apple was on the table. I saw <b>a</b> banana in a bowl.	<u>Singular</u> <b>The</b> apple I ate was rotten. <b>The</b> apple is dangerous. <b>The</b> banana looked bad, too.
<u>Plural</u> Apples are healthy. I saw apples in the store. Bananas are good for you.	<u>Plural</u> I ate <b>a few</b> apples this morning. <b>A few</b> apples were on the table. I saw <b>some</b> bananas in a bowl.	<u>Plural</u> <b>The</b> apples I ate were rotten. <b>The</b> apples are dangerous. <b>The</b> bananas looked bad, too.

<b>Common Nouns: Non-Countable</b>		
Generic reference (-- zero article)	Specific indefinite reference (a, an, indefinite article)	Specific definite reference (the, definite article)
<u>Singular</u> Fruit is healthy. I like fruit. All fruit is good for you.	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Singular</u> <b>The</b> fruit on my plate is delicious. <b>The</b> fruit has seeds.
<u>Plural</u> All kinds of fruits are healthy. I put various fruits in the pie.	<u>Plural</u>	<u>Plural</u> <b>The</b> various fruits are wonderful. I baked <b>the</b> various fruits.

<b>Proper Nouns</b>		
Generic reference (-- zero article)	Specific indefinite reference (a, an, indefinite article)	Specific definite reference (the, definite article)
<u>Singular</u> Mr. Smith is a minister. Aristotle was from Macedonia.	<u>Singular</u> He is <b>a</b> Smith whose family came from England.	<u>Singular</u> He is <b>the</b> Smith who studied at Southeastern Seminary.
<u>Plural</u> Smiths come from England, Scotland, and Ireland.	<u>Plural</u> <b>A few</b> Smiths come from Scotland.	<u>Plural</u> <b>The</b> Smiths live in Raleigh. <b>The</b> Smiths pray together.