

# Teaching the English Article System

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## PART I: Countable/Uncountable and Indefinite/Definite Distinctions

Mastery of the article in English is no easy matter for most EFL students. Even those languages that have an article system differ from English in the application of the rules. One difficulty lies in the fact that the article implies a certain view of the noun to which it applies. To the surprise of speakers of those languages that do not have an article system, the failure to keep this view in mind in English can lead to confusion and sometimes even anger on the part of the listener or reader.

The view of the noun that the article implies contains information of an either/or kind that can be represented as a photographic close-up versus a distance shot. It tells us whether the noun is supposed to be (a) known or identified (close-up, Scene 2) or (b) unfamiliar, vague, or generalized (distance, Scene 1). A second piece of information that articles convey is whether the noun refers to (a) actual examples (Scenes 1 and 2) or (b) a representative of a whole class of nouns (Scene 3). A noun that acts as a class designator is called *generic*. On the other hand, a noun that refers to an actual example is called *specific*. Of the specific nouns, an identifiable noun that is known to the listener/reader is called *definite* and an unidentifiable noun is called *indefinite*. To establish the correct view of any noun in English, six questions must be answered:

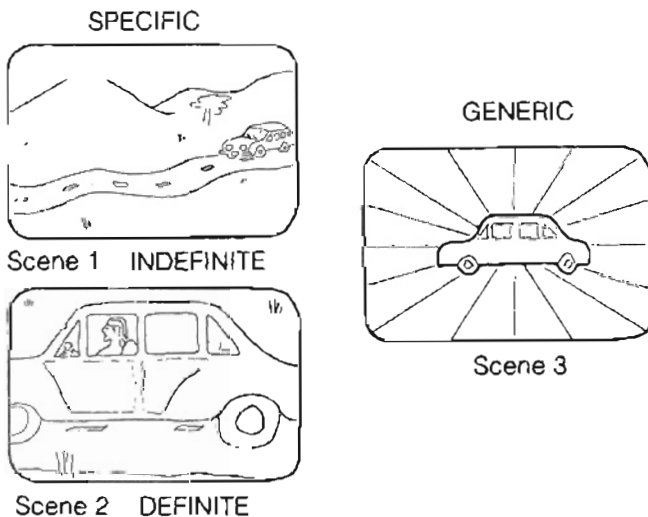


Figure 1. Three Views of the Noun

1. Is the noun generic or specific?
2. Is the noun definite or indefinite?
3. Is the noun countable or uncountable?
4. Is the noun postmodified or not?
5. Is the noun common or proper?
6. Is the noun part of an idiomatic phrase or not?

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Only questions 1-4 will be addressed in this article.

One way to teach the intricacies of the article system is to break it down into its simpler components and to proceed step by step, over a great period of time, and with maximum recycling, in order to give students a sense of confidence that they can at least apply the major rules. To this end, the four questions to be addressed are ranked according to their relative difficulty (from easier to more difficult) and will be discussed in this order:

1. Is the noun countable or uncountable?
2. Is the noun indefinite or definite? (Scene 1 or Scene 2)
3. Is the noun postmodified or not?
4. Is the noun specific or generic? (Scenes 1 and 2 or Scene 3)

### COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE

The countable/uncountable distinction should be reviewed thoroughly before you begin to teach the articles. The linkages of this distinction to other aspects of grammar (e.g., subject-verb agreement, adverbs of quantity, and other aspects of quantification) can serve as a basis for such a review. The simple identification of a noun as permanently countable (e.g., *desk, star, idea*) or uncountable (e.g., *milk, gold, equipment*) is only part of the countable/uncountable distinction. Certain nouns (sometimes called dual, double-duty, or two-way nouns) can be either countable or uncountable with distinct differences in meaning.

- 1a. *An iron* is used for pressing clothes. (countable)
- 1b. *Iron* is used in making steel. (uncountable)
- 1c. There's been *a change* in the weather this year. (countable)
- 1d. I need some *change* for the cigarette machine. (uncountable)

Many uncountable nouns can be made intentionally countable to indicate a particular type of the noun.

- 1e. Many people drink *wine*. (uncountable)
- 1f. A connoisseur carefully selects appropriate *wines*. (countable)

Changing a normally uncountable noun like *wine* into the plural countable form *wines* is very common, especially in English for Science and Technology (EST). The countable form is usually an ellipsis of *kinds of* or *amounts of*.

- 2a. *Wheat* is usually made into flour. (uncountable)
- 2b. Several *wheats* [kinds of wheat] have been developed. (countable)

- 2c. *Pressure* is a function of volume and temperature. (uncountable)
- 2d. Different *pressures* [amounts of pressure] produce different effects. (countable)

Having students change nouns from their countable to their uncountable forms, and vice versa, is a good way to instill the concept of countability. It should also help students to see that the uncountable form always has a more generalized meaning, whereas the countable form has a more specified meaning, as in the difference between *stone* (the generalized material) and *a stone* (a specified object). Changing uncountable nouns into countable form usually requires some kind of container or package or unit measure. Frequently a unit-word plus *of* is used before the uncountable noun.

- 3a. *water* → *a glass of water, a liter of water, a molecule of water*
- 3b. *advice* → *a piece of advice, a word of advice*

Shifting a mass noun directly to its countable form can signal "an instance or embodiment" of an abstract noun.<sup>2</sup>

- 3c. *Life* (life in general) is hard.  
Joan of Arc had *a difficult life* (an individual life).
- 3d. *Time* (time in general) is a human concept.  
The children had *a good time* at the circus (a definite period of limited duration).
- 3e. *Education* (education in general) is important for all societies.  
Becoming a doctor requires *a lengthy education* (the education of a single individual).

On the other hand, changing countable nouns into their uncountable forms usually requires changing them into a more abstract or generalized form.<sup>3</sup>

- 4a. *a chair* → *furniture*
- 4b. *a book* → *literature, printed matter*
- 4c. *a fact* → *knowledge, data*

It is helpful, particularly for those students whose languages do not have an article system, to mention the historical derivation of the article *a* or *an* (the distinction is purely phonetic<sup>4</sup>) from the Old English word *one*. *A(n)* maintains the sense of *one* as a single object. It is therefore impossible to use *a(n)* with a plural or an uncountable noun; we use the zero article (that is, no article) instead. Those students who

2. I am grateful to Marianne Celce-Murcia for pointing out this usage.

3. This is true except for nouns that are divisible or mixable, e.g., *an egg* → *egg*; *a cake* → *cake*.

4. EDITOR'S NOTE: For phonetic determination of *a* and *an* usage, see Q & A column in July 1987 issue of *Forum*.

1. Further information concerning proper vs. common nouns and idiomatic phrases with articles can be found in Master (1986).

speaking languages that have an article system will have less difficulty assigning the correct article once they know whether the noun is countable or uncountable. What they need to practice is the English distinction between *a(n)* and *one*, as these two words are often identical in their own language. The following exercise gives students practice in making this decision.<sup>5</sup>

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)* or *one*.

Since there are many fascinating fields in science and technology, it is sometimes difficult to decide on \_\_\_\_\_ major. Should \_\_\_\_\_ student study \_\_\_\_\_ subject that is really interesting or should the student study \_\_\_\_\_ subject that will pay \_\_\_\_\_ high salary? What if the student is interested not just in \_\_\_\_\_ subject but in two or three? \_\_\_\_\_ solution is to study \_\_\_\_\_ combined major (e.g., biology and engineering). Many people believe that if \_\_\_\_\_ student studies for \_\_\_\_\_ reason only—money—his or her career will not be so successful.

It is possible to review all the aspects of countable vs. uncountable nouns before introducing the concept of "definite." In other words, count/noncount exercises can be devised with *a(n)* and the zero article,  $\emptyset$ , as the only choice, as in the following example.<sup>6</sup>

Directions: Underline the nouns in the following passage. Add *a(n)* or  $\emptyset$  where necessary.

Good laboratory is essential for good research. It should have strong table with hard, acid-resistant surface. It should have water faucet and sink with controlled drainage. It should have gas outlet for Bunsen burner and stands for holding test tubes, flasks, and other laboratory equipment. Well-equipped laboratories also supply hot steam and possibly oxygen or other gases.

## INDEFINITE AND DEFINITE

### First and second mention

The easiest aspect of the article system for an EFL student to master is the first/second-mention rule, which states that the first time a noun appears in context it is considered indefinite, as if being viewed from afar, like a photographic distance shot (Scene 1). The second time the same noun appears in context, it is considered definite, like a focused close-up shot (Scene 2).

5. *A man* is walking down *a road* with *a boy*. *The man* is tired, *the road* is long, and *the boy* is thirsty.

5. Source: Master (1986:8). Answers: *a; a; a; a; one; one (a); a; a; one.*

6. Source: Master (1986:9). Answers: *a good laboratory;  $\emptyset$  good research, a strong table; a hard, acid-resistant surface; a water faucet; a sink;  $\emptyset$  controlled drainage; a gas outlet; a Bunsen burner;  $\emptyset$  stands;  $\emptyset$  test tubes;  $\emptyset$  flasks;  $\emptyset$  laboratory equipment;  $\emptyset$  well-equipped laboratories;  $\emptyset$  hot steam;  $\emptyset$  oxygen;  $\emptyset$  gases.*

Indirect second mention can occur with synonyms.

6. Combine *butter*, *sugar*, and *eggs*. Add flour to *the mixture* [a synonym for the first three ingredients].

First mention makes *a(n)* the correct article for a singular countable noun,  $\emptyset$  for a plural or uncountable one. This first view of the noun is also used in describing general characteristics or situations, for which there are several sentence patterns:

- 7a. It's *a plant*.  
It has *leaves*.  
7b. This is *an ant*.  
That was *a cockroach*.  
7c. There's *a book* on the table.  
Here is *a pencil*.  
7d. *A watch* is an instrument that measures time. (This is a formal definition of the form "An X is a Y that Z," where X = a species, Y = a general class word, and Z = the characteristics that make X different from other Ys.)<sup>7</sup>

Second mention makes *the* the correct article for both countable and uncountable nouns.

8. *A growing plant* requires *water* and *minerals*. *The plant* must also have sunlight. *The minerals* must include nitrates and *the water* must not be salty.

Teaching and practicing first mention vs. second mention is the best way to give students the feeling that mastery is not out of their reach. It is obvious that first or second mention can only be determined in discourse, i.e., a series of sentences in a paragraph. Discrete single-sentence exercises are inappropriate for teaching this point because a noun is seldom reintroduced in the same sentence. The following exercise allows students to practice the first/second mention distinction plus the already learned countable/uncountable distinction.<sup>8</sup>

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)*, *the*, or  $\emptyset$ .

\_\_\_\_\_ simple experiment demonstrates how alkali acts on \_\_\_\_\_ grease or \_\_\_\_\_ oil. Put \_\_\_\_\_ spoonful of \_\_\_\_\_ washing soda with \_\_\_\_\_ water in \_\_\_\_\_ greasy frying pan. Boil \_\_\_\_\_ mixture. In \_\_\_\_\_ short time, \_\_\_\_\_ washing soda and grease become \_\_\_\_\_ particles. \_\_\_\_\_ particles unite to form \_\_\_\_\_ new substance that we call soap. \_\_\_\_\_ soap can be washed out, leaving \_\_\_\_\_ frying pan clean.

7. Definitions represent both postmodification and generic usage. They will be discussed in greater detail in the postmodification section in Part I and then under generic usage in Part II.

8. Source: Master (1986:35). Answers: *a;  $\emptyset$ ;  $\emptyset$  a;  $\emptyset$ ; a; the; a; the;  $\emptyset$ ; the; a; the; the.*

Notice that we have only removed the articles that we know the students will understand at this point. All other articles are left in the passage.

### Second mention without first mention

Second-mention status (Scene 2) can be attained without previous mention. This is the case when the noun is preceded by certain adjectives or when shared knowledge short-circuits the previous-mention requirement. Such adjectives are appropriately called "ranking" adjectives by Frank (1972:141). There are three types:

- a. superlatives (*the best, the most beautiful, the largest*)
- b. sequence adjectives (*the first, the next, the following, the last*)
- c. unique adjectives (*the same, the only, the chief, the main, the principal, the one*)

*Shared knowledge*, perhaps the most difficult aspect of the article system for EFL students to master because of the seeming arbitrariness of the concept, states that if we know the referent, it automatically takes on second-mention status. Shared knowledge can be divided into three classes, with an additional "special" class.

- a. word (*the general, the ocean, the sun, the weather*)
- b. cultural (*the telephone, the capital, the theater*)
- c. regional/local (*the university, the city, the door*)

*World*. The world classification of shared knowledge is the easiest of the classes for students to grasp: *the sun, the moon, the stars, the air, the universe* are clear. *The ocean* is difficult because students know that there are several oceans, each with its proper name. However, in this context we mean *any representative portion of the whole united body of water we call the ocean*. The same is true of the word *beach*. Students typically ask at this point why we can't say *the nature* in the same way, requiring an explanation that the word *nature* must be uncountable to mean *the natural world* (e.g., *nature studies, Mother Nature*). The countable form means *inherent manner or essence* (e.g., *the nature of man, a warlike nature*).

*Cultural*. The cultural classification of shared knowledge is usually fairly obvious to students as, for the most part, they share the same basic cultural knowledge as the teacher.

- 9a. Use *the (tele)phone*.
- 9b. Take *the bus*.
- 9c. I heard it on *the radio*.
- 9d. We went to *the movies*.

The italicized words in sentences 9a–9d all presume shared knowledge of the nature of these items. We would be shocked if someone in our culture responded, "What's a tele-

phone?" or "What's a movie?"<sup>9</sup>

*Regional/Local*. The regional/local classification of shared knowledge is easier for students who have been in the same area for a while such that they hear or have heard references to *the post office, the school, the bookstore, the station*, etc. In other words, if one were to ask, "Which school?" the student would readily answer, "Of course, this school," or if one asked, "Which post office?" the student would answer something like, "Of course, the post office that is located near the school."

Another aspect of this classification applies to items that actually lie in plain view:

- 10a. Shut *the door*.
- 10b. Open *the window*.
- 10c. Put it on *the board*.

In instructions for the use of a device, one can imagine that the item is in plain view:<sup>10</sup>

- 11a. Open *the box* carefully.
- 11b. Lift out *the machine*.
- 11c. Plug in *the black power cord*.

*Special*. The special classification is really the most difficult aspect of shared knowledge, as it presupposes the most information on the part of the listener/reader.

12. I was driving home yesterday when *the radiator* burst. *The radiator* presumes the shared knowledge that cars usually have radiators and that there is usually only one.

It is also possible for the speaker/writer to indicate the *expectation* that the listener/reader shares his or her knowledge:

- 13a. Malaria is an unhealthy side effect of *the green revolution*.
- 13b. Many researchers are investigating *the new unified field theories*.

In other words, the writer presumes that the reader knows what *the green revolution* is or *the new unified field theories* are, whether or not the reader actually knows these terms.

The following exercise allows students to practice the articles associated with shared knowledge along with the countable/uncountable and the first/second-mention distinctions

9. An exception occurs with the noun *television*.

a. There's a movie on television.  
b. There's a clock on the television.

This differentiates television broadcasting (uncountable) from the television as a piece of furniture (countable). However, this is true only in American English.

10. This "plain view" aspect can be used to artificially create a sense of "being there." Imagine a story opening with "The beach is quiet after the sun goes down, and the old pier seems sturdier in silhouette."

that have already been learned. Notice how we are trying to gradually build up the students' article competence.<sup>11</sup>

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)*, *the*, or  $\emptyset$ .

There are many \_\_\_\_\_ creation myths in \_\_\_\_\_ folklore. The formation of \_\_\_\_\_ sun, \_\_\_\_\_ moon, \_\_\_\_\_ stars, \_\_\_\_\_ ocean, and \_\_\_\_\_ whole realm of \_\_\_\_\_ nature all have \_\_\_\_\_ beautiful stories. \_\_\_\_\_ world does not have such stories about \_\_\_\_\_ modern inventions such as \_\_\_\_\_ telephone, radio, and \_\_\_\_\_ television, perhaps because they are too closely related to \_\_\_\_\_ science. However, the story of the formation of the Hawaiian Islands is exactly parallel to \_\_\_\_\_ modern geological account. If you are interested, \_\_\_\_\_ library or \_\_\_\_\_ local school or university has more \_\_\_\_\_ information.

## PREMODIFICATION AND POSTMODIFICATION

### Premodification

Premodification includes any word that precedes the noun in a noun phrase. These words can be predeterminers (quantifiers such as *both*, *all*, *half*, *twice*, etc.), determiners, post-determiners (cardinal and ordinal numbers), or adjectives. The determiners, which include the articles, the words *no*, *this/that*, *every/each*, *either/neither*, *some/any*, and the possessives (e.g., *my*, *your*, *the doctor's*) precede any adjective in the noun phrase and are in all cases mutually exclusive.

- 14a. *the* red books
- 14b. *some* red books
- 14c. *no* red books
- 14d. *John's* red books
- 14e. *the boy's* red books

In 14e, the article is associated with the possessive noun, not with the head noun *books*, and hence is simply an example of a possessive determiner replacing any other determiner.

Adjectives in and of themselves, to the surprise of many EFL students, do not influence the choice of article.

- 15a. Your battery needs *water*.
- 15b. Your battery needs *distilled water*.
- 15c. \*Your battery needs *the distilled water*.

In 15a, *water* is uncountable and indefinite/first mention (Scene 1). The same is true in 15b, but students will argue that *distilled water* is a definite type of water, which it of course is, and that it should therefore be preceded by *the*. At this point, the teacher must explain that, just as our distant

view (Scene 1) of *water* includes *all possible water*, our view of *distilled water* includes *all possible distilled water*. In most cases, when we use *the* with an uncountable noun phrase, we do not mean a specific subset of that noun but rather a limited quantity of it as indicated by a stated or implied postmodifier.

- 16a. I spilled (*some*) *water* on the table. *The water* [i.e., which I spilled] ruined the finish.
- 16b. Fill the bottle with *spring water*. *The (spring) water* [i.e., in the bottle] should last a few days.

This can be demonstrated graphically to students as follows. Draw the shape shown in Figure 2 on the blackboard to represent an uncountable noun. "A" represents the uncertain, generalized shape of an uncountable noun like *water*. "B" represents a limited quantity or portion of that uncountable noun. Elicit examples of "A" from the class (e.g., *water*, *air*, *hope*, *furniture*, *mathematics*).

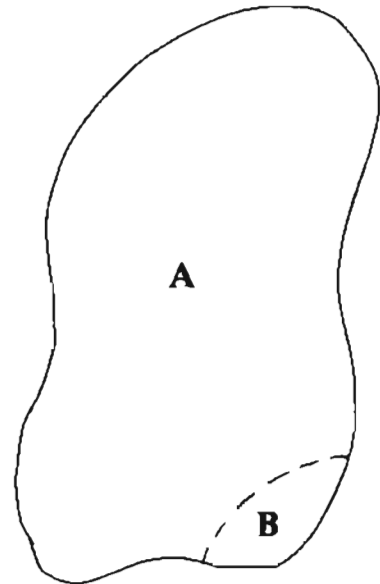


Figure 2. Premodified (A) vs. Postmodified (B) Nouns

Then ask the students how they would classify *lake water*, *dirty air*, *lost hope*, *old wooden furniture*, or *advanced non-linear algebra*: "A" or "B"? Students will tend to mislabel these general examples "B." Then give the students a correct example of "B," preferably using a "real" example (e.g., holding a piece of chalk or a glass of water in the hand, gesturing to indicate the air in the room, or pointing to the glass in the window). Allow students to realize, either with teacher examples or students' spontaneous utterances, that it is usually postmodification that limits or makes definite an uncountable noun (i.e., makes an "A" noun into a "B" noun).

- 17a. *The piece of chalk that is in my hand* is broken.
- 17b. *The air in this room* is stuffy.

11. Answers:  $\emptyset$ ;  $\emptyset$ ; *the*; *the*; *the*; *the*; *the*;  $\emptyset$ ;  $\emptyset$ ; *the*;  $\emptyset$ ; *the*;  $\emptyset$ ;  $\emptyset$ ; *the*; *the* (*your*, *a*); *the* (*your*, *a*);  $\emptyset$ .

The model in Figure 2 filled with small circles can be used to demonstrate a similar effect with plural countable nouns.

18. Jung's library is filled with *books*. *The books* [i.e., in Jung's library] are mostly detective stories.

### Postmodification

Postmodification includes any words or phrases that follow a noun in a noun phrase. These are most commonly relative clauses (reduced or otherwise) or prepositional phrases, most notably *of*-phrases, although there are a few occasions in English wherein single words can postmodify:

- a. bare participles (e.g., *the words underlined*)<sup>12</sup>
- b. indefinite compounds (e.g., *somewhere else, anyone new*)
- c. poetic usage ("If I had *money enough* and time. . .")

### Second mention without first mention

A noun is typically made definite (the equivalent of second mention, Scene 2) by the use of such postmodification. In other words, a noun phrase that includes a relative clause or a prepositional phrase is usually preceded by *the* even though there has been no previous mention.

- 19a. *The man who lives next door* is a doctor.
- 19b. No one expected *the results that were found*.
- 20a. *The circumference of a circle* equals  $2\pi r$ .
- 20b. We take *the collection of garbage* for granted.
- 20c. *The processing of information* takes time and money.
- 20d. Alcoholism is *the way to ruin*.

This is always true if the noun is either an abstract noun or a gerund followed by an *of*-phrase, as in 20b and 20c.<sup>13</sup>

There are, however, two very important conditions under which postmodification does not make the noun definite: (1) in definitions and (2) in partitive structures.

1. *Definitions.* Defining (restrictive) relative clauses that occur in actual definitions serve to differentiate the species being defined from other members of the class to which it belongs.

- 21a. A mosquito is *a gnat* that bites and infects warm-blooded animals.
- 21b. Hard water is *water* containing mineral salts that prevent soap from lathering.

In 21a, a mosquito is a species that is different from other gnats in that it bites and infects warm-blooded animals. 21b is a definition of an uncountable species, hard water. Since the italicized class word implies *is a member of this class*, the

postmodifying defining relative clause does not make the noun definite but states rather that any example of the species shares the characteristics set forth in that relative clause.

When the class word in a definition is preceded by *the*, the effect is not to make the word identified or familiar (Scene 1) but rather to indicate that only one such class word exists.

- 22a. A spectrum is *the band of colors* formed when white light is separated by a prism.
- 22b. Metamorphosis is *the physical transformation* that is undergone by various animals during development after the embryonic stage.

22a indicates that only one band of colors will ever constitute *a spectrum*, 22b that the one word *metamorphosis* embraces all possible physical transformations of this type.

As definitions are really only concerned with generic (i.e., representative rather than actual) nouns, this exception to the postmodification rule will be discussed in greater detail when we discuss generic noun phrases in Part II. There are, however, nongeneric (i.e., specific) sentences in English which utilize differentiating relative clauses of the type found in definitions.

- 23a. He bought *a car that gets 40 miles per gallon*.
- 23b. I need *(some) glue that will not wrinkle paper*.
- 23c. They examined *the molecule that controls heredity* by means of x-ray crystallography.

These examples all indicate representatives of a generic class.

2. *Partitive Structures.* The second condition under which postmodification does not make the noun specific is in partitive structures. Partitive structures in English denote the limitation of indefinite plural countable nouns and uncountable nouns and the transformation of the latter into countable noun phrases. They are made by postmodifying a delimiting noun with an *of*-phrase that has a plural or uncountable noun as its object.

- |                         |   |                     |
|-------------------------|---|---------------------|
| 24a. a box of matches   | } | plural<br>countable |
| 24b. a can of peas      |   |                     |
| 24c. a deck of cards    |   |                     |
| 24d. a glass of beer    | } | uncountable         |
| 24e. a piece of cake    |   |                     |
| 24f. a ray of hope      |   |                     |
| 24g. a splinter of wood |   |                     |
| 24h. a shard of glass   |   |                     |

13. It is also true when the object of the preposition is a representative of the head noun, as is common among proper nouns.

- a. *the field* of chemistry (chemistry is a field)
- b. *the idea* of sharing (sharing is an idea)
- c. *the city* of Rome (Rome is a city)
- d. *the Republic* of Panama (Panama is a republic)

12. See Swales (1981:40-52) on bare participles.

The postmodification in partitive structures, as in 24a–h, does not automatically make the noun definite—as it did in 20a and 20c, which are repeated here:

- 20a. *the circumference* of a circle  
20c. *the processing* of information

In 20a and 20c, the head noun is not a delimiting one and the whole phrase is one of description rather than limitation. Unlike such descriptive phrases, a partitive structure follows normal first/second-mention constraints.

25. I ordered *a piece of cake*, but *the piece of cake* (it) was stale.

The partitive delimitation of uncountable nouns also applies to measurement nouns in English, even though measurement nouns are quasi-abstract.

- 26a. length                      a length of 8 feet  
26b. density                     a density of 0.78  
26c. population                a population of 3 million

In all cases, the inversion of the partitive noun + *of*-phrase (see below) is not grammatically possessive but rather leads to the generation of noun compounds.<sup>14</sup>

- 27a. a shard of glass  
    ————→ \*a glass's shard  
    ————→ a glass shard  
27b. a splinter of wood  
    ————→ \*a wood's splinter  
    ————→ a wood splinter  
27c. a length of 8 feet  
    ————→ \*an 8-foot's length  
    ————→ an 8-foot length

Although not all transformations of nouns + *of*-phrases into their equivalent possessive (i.e., Saxon genitive) or noun compound forms are used in English,

- 28a. *The bulk of the work* is finished. (\*the work's bulk)  
28b. Caffeine is *the cause of an unusually high incidence of miscarriages*. (\*an unusually high incidence of miscarriages' cause)

a simple possessive/nonpossessive test can determine if a head noun is partitive or descriptive. In other words, if the

14. Postmodified nouns are the most common predecessors of noun compounds in English.

- a. a store that sells books = *a bookstore*  
b. an engine that runs on diesel = *a diesel engine*  
c. a supply of oil = *an oil supply*  
d. particles of dust = *dust particles*

transformation is logical, the article must be *the*; if not, the article must be *a(n)* or  $\emptyset$ .

- 29a. *The height of the room* is 8 feet. (descriptive)  
29b. The room has *a height of 8 feet*. (partitive)

Obviously, *the room* can possess height as an attribute (*the room's height*), but *8 feet* cannot (see 27c). The possessive/nonpossessive test is accurate in predicting the correct article before most nouns + *of*-phrases. However,

- 20b. We take *the collection* of garbage for granted.  
20c. *The processing* of information takes time and money.

in 20b, "the garbage's collection," and in 20c, "information's processing," are not acceptable possessives and would therefore predict *a(n)* or  $\emptyset$  as the correct article. But since *collection* is an abstract noun and *processing* is a gerund, we can apply the already established rule for this case—obligatory *the*—which takes precedence over the possessive/nonpossessive test.<sup>15</sup> The following exercises will give students practice with postmodification and the possessive/nonpossessive test.

Directions: Assuming that the phrase is mentioned for the first time, fill the blanks with *a(n)*, *the*, or  $\emptyset$ .<sup>16</sup>

- a. \_\_\_ cup of coffee  
b. \_\_\_ capital of France  
c. \_\_\_ area of a circle  
d. \_\_\_ signs of turbulence  
e. \_\_\_ sharp stab of pain  
f. \_\_\_ underlying character of the doctor  
g. \_\_\_ rate of growth  
h. \_\_\_ plane of our galaxy  
i. \_\_\_ three-year supplement of iodine  
j. \_\_\_ reverse side of this page

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)*, *the*, or  $\emptyset$ .<sup>17</sup>

The earth is made almost entirely of rock and metal. \_\_\_\_\_ outside of the earth has \_\_\_\_\_ thin covering of soil. Inside this covering, there is \_\_\_\_\_ layer of solid rock 30–50 miles deep. Below this crust of soil and rock lies \_\_\_\_\_ mantle of the earth, which has \_\_\_\_\_ thickness of about 600 miles. Next comes an intermediate layer with \_\_\_\_\_ depth of about 1,200 miles. Scientists have learned something about \_\_\_\_\_

15. The test does not apply when the *of* in the *of*-phrase actually means *which has* and therefore represents a differentiating relative clause.

- a. He wore a coat of *many colors* (i.e., which has many colors).  
b. It is a river of *muddied eddies* (i.e., which has muddied eddies).

16. Source: Master (1986:93). Answers: a; the; the;  $\emptyset$ ; a; the; a; the; a; the.

17. Source: Master (1986:93). Answers: the; a; a; the; a; a; the; the; a; the; the; the.

this layer by tracing \_\_\_\_\_ patterns of earthquake shocks. At \_\_\_\_\_ center of the earth lies the white hot core. It has \_\_\_\_\_ pressure of 45 million pounds per square inch (psi) and consists mostly of nickel and iron. Scientists believe that the earth is made of the same material as \_\_\_\_\_ smaller members of the solar system called meteorites. \_\_\_\_\_ series of solid and liquid layers is held together by \_\_\_\_\_ force of gravity.

Notice that in this exercise we have restricted the blanks to those concerned with postmodification. This is done in order to focus the student's attention on such structures. The same exercise can be modified so that blanks are placed before such now familiar structures as *the earth* (shared knowledge: world),  $\emptyset$  *rock and metal* (first-mention uncountable),  $\emptyset$  *scientists* (first-mention plural), *the white-hot core* (shared knowledge: special), *the same material* (ranking adjective:

unique), and *the solar system* (shared knowledge: world). The exercise modified in this way could be given to practice all the article usages learned up to this point.

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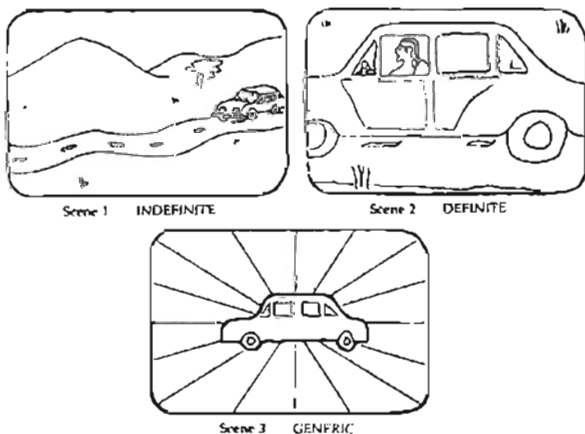


# Teaching the English Article System

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## Part II: Generic vs. Specific

The generic/specific distinction is best taught after all other aspects of the article system have been well practiced. It is particularly important in EST, since a great deal of technical writing is concerned with generic description. In describing the concept of generic articles to students who have no such concept in their native languages, it is useful to relate it to the view we have established for first mention. This was like a distance shot with a camera (Scene 1). The generic can also be depicted as a distance shot, only in this case it is a noun devoid of background, since it is a symbol rather than an actuality (Scene 3).



### First Mention (Specific)

### Generic

- 32a. John bought *a book* *A book* makes a great gift. yesterday.
- 32b. John bought *(some)* Television is replacing *books* as a prime source of information. *books*.
- 32c. He added *(some)* *Water* is composed of oxygen and hydrogen. *water* to the mixture.

In the above examples, the first-mention category embraces actual objects, quantities, or ideas, whereas the generic category refers to representative ones (and therefore cannot be used with unstressed *some*, just as unstressed *some* cannot be used in expressions of identification rather than specification, e.g., \**These are some books.* [*These are books.*] See example 48a-48d.). The only generic article that has no parallel to the first-mention category is *the*. Generic *the* is used only with singular countable nouns, a restriction that is the cause of many errors by ESL students.

- 33a. *The neutron bomb* is the latest member of the nuclear arsenal.
- \*33b. *The oil* } has become very expensive in the last decade.
- 33c. *Oil* }

Generic article usage has received minimal coverage in most ESL grammar workbooks. Yet without a clear description of the various aspects of generic usage, it is not fair to ask students to assign the correct article to a random piece of text, especially when it is of a technical nature. For this reason, it is suggested that teachers and materials developers carefully control "natural text" exercises by deleting only those articles that exactly reflect the area of article usage being taught. In other words, the type of exercise commonly found in which all articles have been deleted should be seen as an endpoint, not as an initial or intermediary step. Such an exercise reinforces the idea that article usage is simply a matter of practice, and any advanced grammar or composition instructor knows that this is not the case.

A DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE USE OF THE GENERIC ARTICLE

The generic article refers to the article used with nouns that are of a symbolic nature. Quirk et al. (1972:147) state that "generic reference is used to denote what is normal or typical for members of a class. Consequently, the distinctions of number and definiteness are neutralized since they are no longer relevant for the generic concept."

Several grammarians (e.g., Jespersen 1964, Lackstrom et al. 1973) have described the incompatibility between generic noun phrases and continuous tenses. Quirk et al. (1972:148) state: "The connection between the dynamic/stative dichotomy and the specific/generic dichotomy is not just one of parallelism but of interdependence."

\*34a. *The tiger (as a class)* is living in Asia.

Generic phrases normally require the generality implied by the noncontinuous tenses.

34b. *The tiger* { lives  
has lived  
lived  
will live  
will have lived } in Asia.

There are, however, some continuous verbs that *do* occur with generic phrases.

35. *The computer* { is becoming a fact of life.  
is taking the place of workers.  
is causing recalcitrant students to become interested in learning.

These continuous verbs all share one feature, causality, which will soon be seen to be an important characteristic of certain generic contexts.

The treatment of the generic can be simplified by posing

two classes of generic nouns: ABSTRACT GENERIC and CONCRETE GENERIC.

Abstract generic

The abstract generic, which refers to the class itself and is never concerned with representatives of that class, applies only to singular countable nouns and is represented by the article *the*.

36. *The alligator* survives well in tropical swamps.

There are two contexts for such abstract generic nouns: CAUSALITY and DEFINITION. Causality includes causes (e.g., diagnoses, purposes) and effects (e.g., results, solutions, inventions).

37a. *The herpes virus* has affected 20 million Americans. (diagnosis)

37b. The world seems smaller because of *the telephone*. (invention)

37c. *The cyclotron* ushered in the new field of particle physics. (solution/result)

Definitions include attributes, classifications, comparisons, etc.

38a. *The neutron bomb* (is a weapon that) destroys people but not property. (attribute)

38b. *The coyote* is a useful predator. (classification)

38c. *The abacus* is sometimes as fast as *the computer*. (comparison)

Neither the premodification nor the postmodification of an abstract generic noun affects the choice of article: it is always *the*. There seems to be a preference for the conciseness of the premodified variety, particularly in EST, since postmodified abstract generic noun phrases are often inverted to noun compounds.

39a. The display unit which uses a cathode ray tube } causes some eye strain.

39b. *The cathode ray display unit* }

39c. The modern system for the purification of water } is a product of the nineteenth century.

39d. *The modern water purification system* }

Abstract generic nouns in discourse differ from singular countable specific nouns in that the former, having no first/second-mention constraints, may keep the same article throughout a passage.

40. *The eagle* is a bird of prey. It (*the eagle*) feeds on a vari-

ety of small animals. *The eagle* has been put on the endangered species list. It would be sad to lose *the eagle* just because we failed to take adequate steps.

Contrast this with:

5a. *A man* is walking down *a road* with *a boy*. *The man* is tired, *the road* is long, and *the boy* is thirsty.

The only way to distinguish a generic noun from a second-mention/specific occurrence is by context.

- 41a. *The neutron bomb* is a devastating weapon. (generic)  
 41b. *The neutron bomb* is in my trunk. (specific second mention)

### Concrete generic

The concrete generic refers to the representative(s) of a class and not to the class itself. Singular concrete generic nouns take the article *a(n)*, and plural and uncountable concrete generic nouns take the zero article,  $\emptyset$ .

- 42a. *A dog* makes a nice pet. (singular countable)  
 42b. *Books* make great gifts. (plural countable)  
 42c. *Water* is the stuff of life. (uncountable)

Although we saw in (40) that abstract generic nouns are not subject to first/second-mention constraints, the first/second-mention view is a strong component of article choice, and it does overlap into the concrete generic realm.

43. The basic problem in controlling thermonuclear fusion is to confine *a plasma*. There have been many attempts to use magnetic fields to confine *the plasma*, but these approaches have run into one difficulty after another. (*Science News*)

*Singular.* Like the abstract generic, which can only be singular, the singular concrete generic also occurs in two contexts: (1) when a generalized instance rather than the actual noun is meant, and (2) in definitions.

- 44a. "What seeds a cloud without using silver iodide? *An airplane*, say researchers." (*Science News*) (generalized instance rather than actuality)  
 44b. *A thermometer* is an instrument that measures temperature. (definition)

Definitions belong to both the abstract and concrete generic classes because in defining (attributing, classifying, etc.), the species fits into a general classification with distinguishing characteristics, whether it is an abstract generic class or a concrete generic representative or group. This accounts for the grammaticality of the oft-cited example in 45a–45c,

- 45a. *The elephant* (is an animal that) never forgets. (class)  
 45b. *An elephant* (is an animal that) never forgets. (exam-

ple)

- 45c. *Elephants* (are animals that) never forget. (group)

which has led many grammarians (e.g., Langendoen (1970) to conclude that a generic noun can take any article with no change in meaning. In fact, singular concrete generic nouns are not grammatical in the context of causality.<sup>1</sup>

- \*46a. The world has become smaller because of *a telephone*.  
 \*46b. *A computer* is changing our society.

Obviously, the effects are not the result of one telephone or one computer, which would be the sense here. Similarly, if the generalized instance rather than the actual noun is meant, the abstract generic is not grammatical.

- \*47. Every family should own *the automobile*.

*Plural/Uncountable.* Uncountable nouns and indefinite plural countable nouns already have a semblance of genericity, as they refer to an amorphous mass or quantity, thus blurring the distinction between class and class representative. The only difference between the generic and specific forms of these amorphous nouns is the implied or stated use of unstressed *some* in the surface structure.

- 48a. Have *some milk*. (specific)  
 48b. *Milk* is good for you. (generic)  
 48c. He disguised his speech by putting (*some*) *pebbles* in his mouth. (specific)  
 48d. *Pebbles* are small rounded stones. (generic)

Uncountable and plural countable generic nouns belong to the concrete generic class. The only way to use the unique concept of genericity that abstract generic *the* implies is to make the noun singular and countable, for it must refer to the class alone and not to representatives of that class. Such nouns must be withdrawn from the amorphousness of the uncountable and indefinite plural and transformed into a sharply defined singularity.

- \*49a. The water } is composed of hydrogen  
 49b. *The water molecule* } and oxygen.  
 \*50a. The boll weevils destroy } cotton.  
 50b. *The boll weevil* destroys }

As has been said earlier (17a and 17b in part I), *the* + an uncountable noun serves only to delimit the noun and is, in all but the limited generic case to be discussed in a moment, never generic.

1. The sentence *An earache causes intense pain* would seem to refute this statement. However, the sentence can be expanded to *An earache is a symptom that causes intense pain*, revealing the first sentence to be a truncated definition based on cause and effect. Definitions belong to both abstract and concrete generics.

- 51a. *The wood* (which I bought) is dry now. (specific)  
 \*51b. *The wood* } is a widely used building material.  
 51c. *Wood* } (generic)

**Postmodified Concrete Generic.** As has been seen in (39), postmodified singular countable concrete generic nouns are often transformed into noun compounds. Whether transformed or not, they retain the same generic classification, either abstract or concrete.

- 52a. *The insulator of glass* } allowed the use of metal  
 52b. *The glass insulator* } power poles.  
   } (abstract generic)  
 52c. *An insulator made of glass* } will prevent electric fires.  
 52d. *A glass insulator* } (concrete generic)

Like their unmodified counterparts, plural countable and uncountable postmodified generic nouns are only concrete (i.e., do not belong to the abstract generic classification) and are best described in terms of descriptive and partitive post-modifying phrases.

### 1. Descriptive concrete generic

Uncountable concrete generic nouns postmodified with descriptive (i.e., nonpartitive) *of*-phrases produce traditional stock phrases with a specific meaning which cannot have a plural headnoun.

- 53a. oil of peppermint  
 53b. mother of pearl  
 53c. plaster of Paris

Countable generic nouns so modified are not stock phrases and do allow plural headnouns.

54. *Women of fashion* are role models for many less fortunate women.

Concrete generic nouns postmodified with a descriptive relative clause function exactly like their premodified equivalents.

- 55a. *Water* is necessary for carbon-based life.  
 55b. *Unclean water* is a problem in many countries.  
 55c. *Water which has been polluted* is unfit to drink.  
 56a. *Horses* are herbivores.  
 56b. *Arabian horses* are famous for their speed.  
 56c. *Horses which have been gelded* are more stable.

### 2. Partitive concrete generic

Uncountable and plural countable nouns postmodified with partitive *of*-phrases often function as generics.

- 57a. *A glass of water* can save a life.  
 57b. *Injections of morphine* can relieve the pain of cancer.  
 57c. Smoking *a pack of cigarettes* a day is not unusual for heavy smokers.

Partitive relative clauses limit concrete generic nouns, usually by indicating their source or location. They will be discussed in the next section.

### Limited generic reference

Limited generic reference is a term used by Quirk et al. (1972:153) to describe a generic noun that does not refer to all the members of a class but to a limited group of them (e.g., *wine* vs. *the wine of France*). Like the limitation of specific indefinite plural countable or uncountable nouns (see 17c and 17d in part I), limited generic reference is expressed with *the* + a postmodified noun, as in examples 58a–58f.

- 58a. *The water that comes from rivers* sometimes carries typhoid. (relative clause/uncountable)  
 58b. *The cars that come from Japan* are very well made. (relative clause/plural countable)  
 58c. *The soil from deciduous woods* is good for crops. (prepositional phrase/uncountable)  
 58d. *The animals in underground caves* are blind and colorless. (prepositional phrase/plural countable)  
 58e. *The wine of France* is a product of art and science. (*of*-phrase/uncountable)  
 58f. *The wines of France* are products of art and science. (*of*-phrase/plural countable)

The postmodifying phrase *limits* the noun, usually by indicating the source or location of that noun. In sentence 58a above, we mean not *any water*, but only the water that comes from rivers. These phrases are partitive in the sense that they indicate a part of the whole (a glass of water, a river of water). If we remove the postmodifying phrase, we cannot use *the*.

- 59a. *Water* sometimes carries typhoid.  
 59b. *Soil* is a good for crops.  
 59c. *Wine* is a product of art and science.

If the postmodifying phrase indicates an alteration or a process that the noun it modifies has undergone (as we saw in 55c and 56c), then the phrase is descriptive rather than partitive and is not an example of limited generic reference. It is incorrect to use *the* before such a phrase (unless the phrase is a second-mention occurrence).

- \*60a. *The DNA that has been exposed to UV radiation* is sometimes unable to replicate.  
 60b. *DNA that has been exposed to UV radiation* is sometimes unable to replicate.  
 \*60c. *The animals that become infected with rabies* must be killed.  
 60d. *Animals that become infected with rabies* must be killed.

It is important to mention that many native speakers do not use *the* in sentences like 58a–58d above, even though it is al-

INDEFINITE: <i>a(n), Ø</i>	DEFINITE: <i>the</i>	ABSTRACT GENERIC: <i>the</i>	CONCRETE GENERIC: <i>a(n), Ø, the</i>	
Number: All	Number: All	Number: Singular countable	Number: Singular countable	Number: Plural countable and uncountable
Article: <i>a(n)</i> : singular countable <i>Ø</i> : plural countable and uncountable	Article: <i>the</i>	Article: <i>the</i>	Articles: <i>a(n)</i> (and <i>the</i> for second mention only)	Article: <i>Ø</i> (and <i>the</i> for limited generic reference)
Contexts: 1. First mention 2. General characteristics with words like <i>it, there, this, etc.</i>	Contexts: 1. Second mention a. direct b. synonymic c. implied 2. Second without first mention a. ranking adjectives (1) superlatives (2) sequence adjectives (3) unique adjectives b. shared knowledge (1) world (2) cultural (3) regional/local (4) special	Contexts: 1. Causality 2. Definition	Contexts: 1. Generalized instance 2. Definition	Contexts: All
Modification: 1. Premodification 2. Postmodification a. relative clauses b. partitive <i>of</i> -phrases (1) possessive test negative	Modification: 1. Premodification 2. Postmodification a. relative clauses b. <i>of</i> -phrases (1) with certain headnouns (a) abstract nouns (b) gerunds (2) possessive test positive	Modification: 1. Premodification 2. Postmodification a. descriptive (1) relative clauses (usually made into noun compounds)	Modification: 1. Premodification 2. Postmodification a. descriptive (1) <i>of</i> -phrases (2) relative clauses b. partitive (1) <i>of</i> -phrases (2) relative clauses	Modification: 1. Premodification 2. Postmodification a. descriptive (1) <i>of</i> -phrases (a) singular headnoun (traditional phrases) (b) plural headnoun (2) relative clauses b. partitive (1) <i>of</i> -phrases (2) relative clauses (see limited generic) c. limited generic reference (1) <i>of</i> -phrases article: <i>the</i> (2) relative clauses article: <i>the</i> ( <i>Ø</i> for some speakers)

ways correct to do so.

- 61a. *Water that comes from rivers* sometimes carries typhoid.  
 61b. *Cars that come from Japan* are very well made.  
 61c. *Soil from deciduous woods* is good for crops.  
 61d. *Animals in underground caves* are blind and colorless.

However, this deletion is never possible with *of*-phrase postmodification, as in sentences 58e and 58f.

- \*62a. *Wine of France* is a product of art and science.  
 \*62b. *Wines of France* are a product of art and science.

In any case, inversion into a noun compound removes any postmodifying phrase and makes the zero article obligatory.

- 63a. *French wine.* } is a product of art and  
 \*63b. *The French wine.* } science.  
 63c. *River water* } sometimes carries typhoid.  
 \*63d. *The river water* }  
 63e. *Japanese cars* } are very well made.  
 \*63f. *The Japanese cars* }

Limited generic reference belongs to the concrete generic category because, like the uncountable generic, it does not

refer to a sharply defined singularity and cannot occur with singular countable nouns.

- 64a. *The lakes of France* are a popular tourist attraction.  
 64b. *The wine(s) in this shop* is (are) expensive.  
 64c. *The trees of this region* are well known.

If this kind of phrase is constructed with a singular countable noun, it no longer denotes limited generic but rather nonlimited abstract or concrete generic reference, which we have already seen to be descriptive rather than limiting.

- 65a. *The tree of this region* is a symbol of Buddhist enlightenment.  
 65b. *The knight in shining armor* is the symbol of an ideal man to some people.

This detailed description of the generic article is designed more for the teacher than the student. If, however, students are ready for it and interested, as many advanced-level students are, the system should be taught to whatever extent deemed necessary, perhaps on an individual basis depending on the students' individual errors.

The chart above summarizes the uses of the article as presented in this article.

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