

Definite and indefinite articles (the/a/an)

English has two types of articles: definite (the) and indefinite (a/an). How do we use them?

Avoid using unnecessary articles with plural nouns

- If you are using a plural noun (such as students, criteria, or theses), you usually don't need to use "the."

Incorrect

- ✗ *The researchers* have commonly found that.....
- ✗ *The studies* were undertaken to determine

Correct

- ✓ *Researchers* have commonly found that
- ✓ *Studies* were undertaken to determine

The exception is if you want to distinguish that you are talking **about a particular group of people or things.**

Example

This topic has been investigated by teams at many top universities. *The researchers* have commonly found that

Explanation

You are talking specifically about work undertaken by certain teams (and not about researchers in general).

The department conducted numerous studies with the funding. *The studies* were undertaken to determine

You are referring specifically to the studies that were undertaken in this context (as opposed to studies in general).

Don't use "a" or "an" with uncountable nouns

- As the term implies, an uncountable (or mass) noun is something that normally cannot be counted (such as air, anger, information, knowledge, research, rice, and training).
- Uncountable nouns cannot be accompanied by "a" or "an," as it's impossible to have *one* of these things. If you really want to talk about one of something, the easiest option is to replace the uncountable noun with one that is countable. Another option is to add a countable noun after the uncountable noun.

Incorrect	Correct alternatives
✗ <i>A research</i> showed that	✓ <i>A study</i> showed that
	✓ <i>A research project</i> showed that

✗ <i>A training</i> was held	✓ <i>A class</i> was held
	✓ <i>A training course</i> was held

Use an article (or other determiner) with a singular countable noun

Singular countable nouns (such as formula, participant, and professor) generally cannot stand on their own. If you are not using a possessive (e.g. my, your, her) or a demonstrative (e.g. this, that), you should use an article.

Incorrect	Alternatives
✗ In <i>interview</i> it was revealed that	✓ In <i>his interview</i> it was revealed that ✓ In <i>that interview</i> it was revealed that ✓ In <i>the interview</i> it was revealed that ✓ In <i>an interview</i> it was revealed that
✗ We tested <i>hypothesis</i> before we	✓ We tested <i>our hypothesis</i> before we ✓ We tested <i>this hypothesis</i> before we ✓ We tested <i>the hypothesis</i> before we ✓ We tested <i>a hypothesis</i> before we

Correctly choose “a” or “an” in front of an acronym

- words **starting with a consonant sound** need “a”

e.g., a study, a participant, a European

- words **starting with a vowel sound** need “an”

e.g., an observation, an interview, an Ethiopian).

- the same is true with acronyms (or initialisms), which are formed using the first letter of a series of words (such as SWOT for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).
- when deciding whether “a” or “an” is appropriate, focus on how the acronym would be pronounced.

e.g. not “a HR manager” BUT “**an HR manager**” is the correct choice.

Examples acronyms with a/an

Many employees earned **an** MBA/ MSc/MA/ or **a** PhD from **an** EU-accredited programme.

After it creates **an** R&D department, the agency plans to apply for **an** FAO grant.

Having **an** HQ abroad can be difficult for a company with **a** HEPNET project.

✓ Acronyms taking “the”

Acronyms that relate to organizations and countries have their own special guidelines when it comes to “the.”

The general test is whether an acronym would be read letter by letter (as in ADB) or pronounced as a word (as in NATO). Acronyms that are read letter by letter usually need “the”:

Examples acronyms with “the”

The headquarters of the UN are in the US.

Several delegations from the EU have visited the UAE.

✓ Acronyms that are read as words normally do not need “the”:

Examples acronyms without “the”

The secretary-general of OPEC used to work at UNESCO.

Officials from FIFA are currently under scrutiny.

✓ Country names that need “the”

Most country names do not need an article. For instance, we say “The researcher travelled to Zimbabwe” or “The study was conducted in Thailand.”

However, “the” is needed in the following circumstances:

Country rule	Example
When the country's name includes a common noun, such as <i>Federation, Kingdom, Republic, or State</i>	the Central African <i>Republic</i> the Czech <i>Republic</i>
	the Democratic People's <i>Republic</i> of Korea
	the Dominican <i>Republic</i>
	the <i>Kingdom</i> of Bhutan
	the <i>Republic</i> of Korea

Country rule	Example
When the country's name <i>is</i> a plural noun or <i>contains</i> a plural noun	the <i>Russian Federation</i> the <i>United Kingdom</i>
By tradition	the <i>Bahamas</i> the <i>Federated States of Micronesia</i> the <i>Maldives</i> the <i>Marshall Islands</i> the <i>Netherlands</i> the <i>Philippines</i> the <i>Solomon Islands</i> the <i>United Arab Emirates</i> the <i>United States</i>
A city that takes "the"	the <i>Gambia</i> the <i>Hague</i>

Recognizing and using uncountable nouns

Uncountable nouns, also known as mass nouns or noncount nouns, refer to a mass of something or an abstract concept that can't be counted (except with a unit of measurement).

Countable nouns can be counted as individual items.

The main rules to remember for uncountable nouns are that they cannot be pluralized, and that they never take indefinite articles (a or an).

Common examples of uncountable nouns

Type of noun	Examples
✓ Abstract concepts and physical phenomena	research, advice, information, knowledge, money, logic, gravity, acceleration, pollution, feedback, traffic, radiation, biomass, lightning
✓ Substances, materials and	air, water, blood, algae, mud, grass, seaweed, graphite,

Common examples of uncountable nouns

Type of noun	Examples
foods	clay, quartz, rice, flour, meat
✓ Elements, chemicals and gases	helium, iron, copper, hydrochloric acid, calcium carbonate, carbon monoxide, methane
✓ Disciplines and fields	biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, geography, psychology, economics, aquaculture, trigonometry

Countable or uncountable?

Some nouns in English, like those in the table above, are always (or nearly always) uncountable. **Many other nouns, however, can be countable or uncountable depending on the context.**

To identify whether a noun is countable or uncountable in a particular context, consider whether you **are referring to a single tangible item, entity or type of something**, or if you are describing **a general mass or idea of something**.

Examples of nouns that can be countable or uncountable

Type of noun	Uncountable	Countable	Other examples
✓ Abstract concepts	He rarely feels fear .	A fear of spiders is known as arachnophobia .	Concepts can often be countable or uncountable: weight, love, courage, strength, time, beauty, pressure, vision, business .
✓ Substances, materials and phenomena	Houseplants need the optimum amount of light to thrive.	She saw a light at the end of the tunnel.	Many nouns referring to substances are also used to refer to individual items or types of the substance in question: bone, skin, light, sound, solid, liquid, gas, plastic, acid, alkali .
✓ Types of something	Fish is an excellent source of protein.	Coral reefs are home to a huge variety of fishes .	Many uncountables, including food, drink, and other substances, can become countable when referring to a specific type of the noun in question: a Chilean wine, soft cheeses .

Examples of nouns that can be countable or uncountable

Type of noun	Uncountable	Countable	Other examples
			toxic gases.
✓ Drinks	Java produces excellent coffee. coffees this morning.	I had two	Liquids are usually uncountable, but when referring to a single drink they are often colloquially used as countables: a beer, a tea, a water, a coke.

Are uncountable nouns singular or plural?

Uncountable nouns should be treated as singular, and thus should always be used with **singular verbs** to ensure correct subject-verb agreement.

- ✗ **Knowledges are power.**
- ✗ **Knowledge are power.**
- ✓ **Knowledge is power.**