

## No Article/Zero Article

Most nouns in English need an article (a, an, the). Articles can also be replaced by possessive pronouns (my, her, our etc.), determiners (this/that/these/those, certain etc.) and quantifiers (some, a lot of etc.). Here are some examples where the nouns are underlined, and the articles/article replacements are in **bold**:

A man walked down **the** street.

You should bring **an** umbrella.

**My** parents won't let me drive **our** car.

**That** person is not **her** twin. She just looks like her.

**Certain** people like bungee jumping and others don't.

However, there are certain situations and certain nouns that do not need any of these words before them. Study the cases below:

### Case 1 – Plural Countable Nouns

Sometimes plural nouns have the definite article (the) and sometimes they do not. Take a look at these two sentences:

Cars can be found everywhere in cities.

**The** cars produced last month need to be recalled.

In the first sentence, we are referring to 'all cars' or 'cars in general'. In this case we do not need an article. In the second sentence, we are being particular and referring only to the cars that were made last month. In this case, when you are being specific, you need an article.

In some cases, it is not easy or even possible to know whether a sentence should or should not have an article. Look at this example:

I visited New York and saw tall buildings.

I visited New York and saw **the** tall buildings.

Does this person mean that they saw tall buildings in general or the tall buildings specific to New York? In this case, both sentences are correct.

## Case 2 – Uncountable Nouns

There are many uncountable nouns in English. Some of these make sense (milk, water, hair gel) and some make less sense (information, advice, guidance). These nouns follow the guidelines that we talked about for plural countable nouns.

Information is important in business.

**The** information you gave me about **my** business is important.

In the first sentence, we are referring to information and business in general, so there is no article. In the second sentence, the two nouns are specific, so there is an article (the) and a possessive pronoun (my) that replaces an article.

## Case 3 – Abstract Nouns

Words like love, justice, patience are considered abstract nouns. Usually, these nouns do not need an article, but they follow the same guidelines we have discussed so far. If it is general, no article. If it is specific, add an article.

Patience is something that I would like to work on.

**My** patience for you is non-existent!

The most important thing in the world is love.

**The** love I have for you transcends space and time.

## Case 4 – Gerunds

Gerunds (verb+ing) are nouns in a sentence but usually they don't need an article. Here are some examples:

Swimming is my favourite activity.

I look forward to meeting you.

You should avoid visiting on Sundays.

However, you need to be careful. Not every word that ends with -ing is a gerund. Here are some examples of words that look like gerunds, but they are not, and they might need an article before them.

I am looking forward to the meeting on Friday. (noun)

The visiting ambassador left and returned home. (adjective)

## Case 5 – Names

We almost never use articles before a person's names. It is not necessary because when we use a name, people know who we are talking about.

I talked to Michael.

However, it is not impossible. We could invent a situation where we need to be more specific about which Michael we are referring to. In this case we would go back to our old guideline.

I wasn't talking to **this** Michael. I was talking to **the** Michael who is standing over there!

Country names are a bit of a problem. Most country names do not require an article.

France is well known for its cheese and wine.

Would you ever visit Australia?

However, there are some country names that need an article. The two that come up in conversation the most are the United States and the United Kingdom, but here is (more or less) a complete list:

1. the United States (the USA)
2. the United Kingdom (the UK)
3. the Netherlands
4. the Gambia
5. the Philippines
6. the Bahamas
7. the Maldives
8. the Seychelles

Names of universities also cause some problems. If the university name has an ‘of’ in it, then it needs an article. If there is no ‘of’, usually it does not.

I went to Stanford University.

I went to **the** University of Toronto.

## Case 6 – Just a Bunch of Random Stuff

Unfortunately, the rules for articles are not easy, and there are many things that we just need to remember or learn by practice. Here is a summary of times that we do not use articles in English:

Words	Examples
school, prison, hospital (British English), university, church	I start school at 9 a.m. He has been in prison for 10 years. Johnny is in hospital!
breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner, dessert (when referred to as part of a meal)	We went to a restaurant for breakfast. Dinner is at 7. Would you like dessert?
bed, work, home	I’m not at work, I’m at home. I’m sick and I’m going to bed.
spring, summer, fall/autumn, winter	Spring is my favorite time of year.
Christmas, Thanksgiving, Valentine’s Day (almost all holidays – but not the 4 <sup>th</sup> of July, for example)	Christmas costs too much money. I don’t want to make dinner for Thanksgiving.
bus, train, plane, foot (when used with the word ‘by’)	I prefer traveling by car to going by plane.
English, history, art etc. (school subjects)	I studied art at university. I hated English class at school.
hockey, baseball, volleyball etc. (sports)	I played hockey when I was a kid.
names of parks, streets, cities, states, continents, islands	I went to Hyde Park the other day. It is on Bourbon Street.
names of bays, single lakes, single mountains (mountain ranges need an article – the Alps, for example)	I enjoy spending time near San Francisco Bay. Have you been to Lake Geneva? Mount Everest is the tallest mountain.

English, Spanish, French etc. (languages)	I studied French at school, but I learned a lot of Spanish when I was travelling.
outer space, nature (these words are common English learner mistakes)	The astronauts flew into space. I really enjoy being in nature.

## Activity

**Instructions:** Read the paragraph below. Some of the nouns have been underlined. If there shouldn't be an article, leave the space blank. If there should be an article, write the word 'the' in the space. After you are finished, check the answer key.

Last summer, I traveled to Netherlands. I stayed in Amsterdam for a week and explored many parks and museums. One day, I visited University of Amsterdam to see the campus. I also went to Dam Square to visit a friend who lives in the city. After that, I walked along canals and took photos of historic buildings. Later, I went by train to another city. Traveling by plane would have been faster, but I wanted to see countryside. I learned a lot about history and really enjoyed my trip!

## Answer Key & Explanations

<b><u>Word</u></b>	<b><u>Correction</u></b>	<b><u>Explanation</u></b>
Netherlands	the Netherlands	This country requires 'the'
parks	No article	No article is needed because we have the quantifier 'many'
museums	No article	No article is needed because we have the quantifier 'many'
University of Amsterdam	the University of Amsterdam	University names with "of" require "the."
Dam Square	No article	Places like "hospital" do not take an article when used in a general sense.
canals	No article/the canals	Both answers are possible. We do not know if it is general or specific.
historic buildings	No article/the historic buildings	Both answers are possible. We do not know if it is general or specific.
train	No article	Transportation nouns do not need an article when used with "by."
plane	No article	Transportation nouns do not need an article when used with "by."
countryside	the countryside	"Countryside" needs an article when referring to a general rural area.
history	No article	School subjects and abstract nouns do not need an article when general