



The Writing Center



Guidelines for Article Usage

Using A or Ø (No Article)

SINGULAR NOUNS	PLURAL COUNT NOUNS	NONCOUNT NOUNS
a) A dog makes a good pet.* b) A banana is yellow. c) A pencil contains lead. A speaker uses <i>a</i> with a singular count noun when s/he is making a generalization. In (a): The speaker is talking about any dog, all dogs, dogs in general	d) Ø Dogs make good pets.* e) Ø Bananas are yellow. f) Ø Pencils contain lead A speaker uses no article (Ø) with a plural count noun when making a generalization.** In (d): the speaker is talking about any dog, all dogs, dogs in general.	g) Ø Fruit is good for you. h) Ø Coffee contains caffeine. i) I like Ø music . A speaker uses no article (Ø) with a noncount noun when making a generalization. In (g): the speaker is talking about fruit in general.

* Note: (a) and (d) have the same meaning.

Sometimes a speaker uses an expression of quantity (e.g., **almost all, most, some) when s/he makes a generalization: Almost all dogs make good pets. Most dogs are friendly. Some dogs have short hair.

Using A or Some

SINGULAR NOUNS	PLURAL COUNT NOUNS	NONCOUNT NOUNS
j) I saw a dog in my yard. k) Mary ate a banana . l) I need a pencil . A speaker uses a with a singular count noun when talking about one thing (or person) that is not specific. In (j): The speaker is saying, "I saw one dog (not two dogs, some dogs, many dogs). It wasn't a specific dog. It was only one dog out of the whole group of animals called dogs.	m) I saw some dogs in my yard. n) Mary bought some bananas . o) Bob has some pencils in his pocket A speaker often uses some * with a plural count noun when s/he is talking about things (or people) that are not specific. In (m): The speaker is saying, "I saw more than one dog. They weren't specific dogs (e.g., your dogs). The exact number of dogs isn't important; I'm simply saying that I saw an indefinite number of dogs.	p) I bought some fruit . q) Bob drank some coffee . r) Would you like to listen to some music ? A speaker often uses some * with a noncount noun when s/he is talking about something that is not specific. In (p): The speaker is saying, "I bought an indefinite amount of fruit. The exact amount isn't important. And I'm not talking about specific fruit (e.g., that fruit, the fruit in that bowl.)

*In addition to **some**, a speaker might use **several, a few, a lot of, etc.**, with a plural count noun, or **a little, a lot of, etc.**, with a noncount noun.

Using The

SINGULAR NOUNS	PLURAL COUNT NOUNS	NONCOUNT NOUNS
s) Did you feed the dog ? t) I had a banana and an apple. I gave the banana to Mary. u) The pencil on that desk is Jim's. v) The sun is shining. w) Please close the door . x) Mary is in the kitchen .	y) Did you feed the dogs . z) I had some bananas and apples. I gave the bananas to Mary. aa) The pencils on that desk are Jim's. bb) Please turn off the lights .	cc) The fruit in this bowl is ripe. dd) I drank some coffee and some milk. The coffee was hot. ee) I can't hear you. The music is too loud. ff) The air is cold today

The is used in front of

- Singular count nouns: *the dog*.
- Plural count nouns: *the dogs*.
- Noncount nouns: *the fruit*.

A speaker uses **the** (not a, Ø, or some) when the speaker and the listener are thinking about the same specific person(s) or thing(s).

In (s): The speaker and the listener are thinking about the same specific dog. The listener knows which dog the speaker is talking about: the dog that they own, the dog that they feed every day. There is only one dog that the speaker could possibly be talking about.

In (t): A speaker uses **the** when s/he mentions a noun the second time.

First mention:

*I had a **banana**...*

Second mention:

*I gave **the banana**...*

In the second mention, the listener now knows which banana the speaker is talking about: the banana the speaker had (not the banana John had, not the banana in the bowl).