

Articles

The use of articles (*a*, *an* and *the*) is very difficult in English. I have not written about each little rule, only the most important ones.

1. In front of singular countable nouns, there must be “something”.
• Students most often leave out “a/an”.

Examples:

Correct:

*Lemuel is **a** doctor.*

*Lemuel is **the** doctor* (for example, the only one in the village).

*Lemuel is **our** doctor.*

*Lemuel is **that** doctor* (he is standing there).

Incorrect:

~~*Lemuel is doctor.*~~

Other examples:

*Have you got **a** car?*

*This is **a** mouse.*

*There is **a** cap on Peter's head.*

2. In front of names, “the” is rare.
• There are some well-defined exceptions.

3. “a/an” is indefinite (it is not known or has not been mentioned before), the is
• definite

(known by everybody or has been mentioned before)

Example:

*I saw **a** lion.* (The lion was not mentioned earlier, I used „a”)

***The** lion was following **a** woman.* (The lion was mentioned earlier (“the”) but the woman was not (“a”))

***The** woman was pulling **a** cart.* (The woman was mentioned (“the”), the cart was not (“a”))

***The** lion was smelling **the** cart.* (Both the lion and the cart were mentioned earlier, therefore I used „the”)

***The** cart was full of Whiskas.*

“Definiteness” is very often expressed with a possessive structure or a defining relative clause.

*The length **of my car** is 400 cm.* (“Length” is made definite by “of my car”.)

*The pen **that I got for my birthday** is wonderful.* (“Pen” is made definite by “that I got for my birthday”.)

Definite can also mean “all”. Examples:

Yesterday evening I was sitting in the garden and looking at **the** stars. (“the” means I was looking at all the stars that I could see)

I took **the** children to the cinema. (All the children, for example all my children, not just some of them.)

4. There are three types of generalizations.

a) *A tiger is a dangerous animal.* (It means tigers in general.)

Here, a singular noun is used with “a/an”. It is usually the subject.

b) *The dog is a mammal.*

The telephone was invented by Bell.

Here “the” is used with a singular noun. It is usually used with inventions and scientific categories.

c) No article is used (neither “the”, nor “a/an”). Countable nouns are used in the plural, uncountable nouns in the singular. This type of generalization is by far the most common. Examples:

Bears are dangerous. (generalization)

The bears are dangerous. (No generalization – we are talking about some bears who are definite, they were mentioned before.)

I like dogs. (generalization – countable – plural)

I like tea. (generalization – uncountable – singular)

Let us see “definite” in a little more detail. Example:

The treatment improved mechanical properties.

You may think that *mechanical properties* is “definite” but grammatically, it is not. This problem is similar to the “definiteness” of abstract nouns, see below (5.).

Of course, if you want “mechanical properties” to be definite, you can make it definite (see above):

the mechanical properties of the material (possessive)

the mechanical properties that/which we tested (relative clause)

Use these tricks if you cannot accept that “mechanical properties” alone is practically always indefinite, and therefore cannot take “the”.

5. And now the greatest problem for most learners of English: abstract nouns.

In English there must not be a definite article in front of abstract nouns (unless they are definite). Example:

Teaching is difficult.

a) Examples of abstract nouns (abstract nouns are usually uncountable)

1. Normal everyday words: *nature, life, love, anger, happiness...*

2. Everyday and technical words: *crystallinity, length, width, surface roughness, cell structure, delamination, (tensile) strength, wettability, foaming agent content, (melt) temperature, (cross-link) density, elongation at break, permeability, (cold) crystallization, (average cell) diameter, T-RTM, aging/ageing, tool wear, (layer) thickness, (particle size) distribution, (cooling) time, (insert) efficiency, cooling, (light) transmission, resistivity, conductivity, (relative) humidity, porosity, impregnation...*

b) Some endings usually indicate an abstract noun.

– *ing (often): longing, eating, bonding, injection molding*

– *age (often): shrinkage, postage,*

– *ance/ence: (often) brilliance,*

- *ancy/ency* (often) *hesitancy, complacency*
- *ery* (when not a place, like *bakery*): *slavery, bravery, machinery*
- *hood* (often): *childhood, manhood*
- *manship*: *marksmanship*
- *ness* (often): *kindness, loudness,*
- *ship* (often): *friendship*

However, this is only partial help.

Internet sources define abstract nouns as things that cannot be perceived with the five senses. That would be a nice, simple definition if it worked, but how about **surface roughness/loudness/brightness/hardness/temperature**, etc.?

(touch) (hearing) (sight) (touch) (touch)

Because these are abstract nouns, too!

Examples of abstract nouns:

I love **sport/nature/life**. (not definite)

Life in 13th century England was not easy. (still not definite)

The sport (that) they love best is curling. (definite – *that/which* defines the abstract noun)

He lives **the life** he has always dreamed of. (definite – see above)

Anger can be controlled. (not definite)

We can make an abstract noun definite, most commonly with a defining relative clause – *that/which*) or with a possessive construction, usually “**of...**”.

Some more examples:

We treated the samples. As a result, **crystallinity** increased by 20%. (not definite)

The crystallinity of the samples increased by 20%. (definite)

Humidity influences several properties of the material. (not definite)

The humidity of ambient air needs to be measured. (definite)

Activator **concentration** did not change during the process. (not definite)

The concentration of the activator influences the process. (definite)

c) Abstract nouns can be general or “concrete”. It is easier to imagine that an abstract noun in a general context does not have “the” because we do not have “the” in the most common type of generalization, either (see 4.). Examples:

Length is an important characteristic.

Roughness has an effect on **bonding strength**.

With these interlayer techniques, **interlaminar fracture toughness** can be enhanced.

d) However, when the abstract noun has a “concrete” meaning, is it not definite? Can we not use “the”? Examples of concrete situations:

We measured **elongation at break**.

Crystallinity did not change.

Foaming agent content had an effect on mechanical properties.

Hardness decreased by 50%.

This tricky: we are talking about a concrete situation, so **logically** it is definite but is it definite **grammatically**? It is far more “difficult” for an abstract noun (noun phrase) to be definite grammatically than logically! The above examples are not definite enough to be definite grammatically! Actually, it is quite difficult for an abstract noun (noun phrase) to be grammatically “definite” and take “the” without “external help” (a defining

relative clause or an “of” construction), so the easy rule is that it is best to consider an abstract noun (noun phrase) indefinite when it is “alone”. Examples of definite and indefinite nouns:

The length of the product is important.

We measured **the length of the product**.

Crystallinity did not change.

The crystallinity that we measured is not high enough for this application.

Here are some more examples of abstract nouns (noun phrases) that can be used in the above example sentences as well:

width, surface roughness, quality, (cross-link) density, permeability, (layer) thickness, cooling time, cooling, light transmission, resistivity, conductivity, porosity...

6. ‘In front of’ the ‘of’ structure, there is almost always a ‘the’.

~~Legs of the table are thin.~~

The legs of the table are thin.

She lives in **the United States of America**.