ARTICLES – With and Without Abstract Nouns

I. Articles: Basic Usage

The = definite article   **A / An =** indefinite article

An **article** is a kind of adjective which is always used with / gives some information about a noun.

Q. When should I use an **article**?

Generally, we use an article before a **singular, countable noun**:
- There is **a** bag on **the** table.
- I put **an** apple in **the** bag.

You can also use **the** with **uncountable** nouns (these nouns denote an idea, quality, or state rather than a concrete object.) You cannot use **a** or **an** with uncountable nouns.
- I hear **the** weather will be cold and chilly tomorrow.
- **The** love of a child is the highest form of love.

The first time you mention an **uncountable** noun, you might want to use an amount such as "some."
- I bought **some** flour today. When I opened **the** bag, I found it had bugs in it.

You can also write:
- I bought **a** bag of flour today.

Q. But when do I use **a** / **an** and when do I use **the**?

Use **the** before a noun that you have already introduced to your reader:
- **The** train to the city center arrives every morning at 6:00.

You can also use **the** when there is only one of the noun you are referring to:
- Who is **the** mayor of Aspen?

…or you can use **the** when the noun is identified within the sentence:
- There's **the** woman who works at the library.

Use **a** / **an** before a **non-specific noun**:
- He said that he was the mayor of **a** small town. (The writer didn't identify the town)

…or before a noun you haven't already introduced to your reader:
- **A** noisy truck passes by here early every morning. (It's not a specific truck, and the writer is mentioning it for the first time)

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Finally, use **a** before nouns that begin with a consonant (or a consonant sound):

- I want to get **a** dog or **a** cat for **a** pet.
- I want to enroll in classes at **a** university.
- She only needs **a** yard of fabric to finish her project.

Use **an** before nouns that begin with a vowel (or a vowel sound):

- I hope to see **an** ocelot at the zoo.
- I have to use **an** umbrella when it rains.
- Class begins in **an** hour.

You can refer to animals in general either by using **the** to make the animal singular:

- Is **the** dolphin a highly intelligent creature?

…or you can say:

- Are dolphins highly intelligent creatures?

In this case, because the noun "dolphins" is plural, you don't need an article at all.

Most other countable nouns can also be singular or plural when they are referred to in general, but most nouns should have an **a** or **an** (not **the**) when they are mentioned the first time:

- **A** shop owner needs to know all laws regarding businesses. (1st mention of shop owners)
- Shop owners have to know all business laws. (later mention of shop owners)

Sometimes, you have three choices:

- **The** Geo Metro is an economical car.
- **A** Geo Metro is an economical car.
- Geo Metros are economical cars.

II.   Abstract Nouns, with and without Articles

An **abstract** noun (aka **uncountable** noun) is a noun denoting an idea, quality, or state rather than a concrete object.

Here are some sentences with **abstract** / **uncountable** nouns that don't need an article:

- It takes **courage** to climb the tallest mountain in the world.
- The editor we hire needs to have **enthusiasm, dedication**, and **knowledge**.
- Is **love** the most important emotion?
- As a child she lived in **poverty**, but now she possesses great **wealth**.
- Many people feel that **happiness** is the most important thing in **life.**

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Exception - use an **article**:

Sometimes there is a particular type of abstract noun: when we refer to a type, amount, or specific instance of the noun [NOT the noun in general], we use **the**.

- Don't become a lion tamer if you don't have **the** courage.
- Our team has enough enthusiasm and drive to get **the** job done!
- They escaped **the** poverty of their homeland.

Exception - nouns which are sometimes **abstract** and sometimes **concrete** or countable:

Some nouns are used as both **abstract** and **concrete** nouns; in some situations they don't need an article, and in other situations they do. The more you read and pay attention, the more of these nouns you will notice:

Life and death as **abstract** nouns:
- What is the most important thing in **life**?
- Hospice care prepares a patient and their family for the moment of **death**.

Life and death as **concrete** nouns:
- **The life** of Martin Luther King, Jr. was inspiring.
- **The death** of Martin Luther King, Jr. was devastating.

Discipline as an **abstract** noun:
- To succeed in life, you need **discipline**.

Discipline as a **concrete** noun:
- Quantum mechanics is **a** challenging **discipline.**

Time as an **abstract** noun:
- **Time** seems to move faster as we grow older.

Time as a **concrete** noun:
- Do you have **the time**?

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