

Make-up class assignment: Definite & indefinite articles

Compare the examples in the left and right columns of the following pages, and try to infer the linguistic principles of article usage ('a' & 'the'). Do this based on the examples, rather than consulting language reference or grammar books. As a group, write up your observations and turn them in. This can be written informally, e.g., in outline, bullet point, or any format. Be sure to include your group members' names (3-6 people per group). Bring a hard copy write-up of your findings to class on Tuesday.

Definite & indefinite articles

English has a definite article ('the'), an indefinite article ('a/an'), and noun phrases with no articles (null or "Ø"). Take a look at the noun phrases in **boldface** below. Are the nouns above count or non-count nouns? What patterns in meaning or nuance do you see when you compare those on the left and right?

1. Null cf. indefinite 'a'

a.

Five years ago, the patient weighed over 100 kg. With positive support and encouragement from others, she first stopped eating **cake** and **soda**, which she used to consume every day. More recently, by eating **salad** every day and cutting down on **coffee**, she has lost weight and increased her energy levels. She drinks less **coffee** and **juice** (since fruit juice often has extra sugar added), and more **water**. Since making these changes, she has lost a significant amount of **weight**.

c.

Stone or **rock** have been used for human-made structures from the beginnings of human history. '**Rock**' is more often a geological term, or a term for everyday pieces of rock, while '**stone**' is more often a term for the material, especially for building materials that have been processed. **Rock**, as in large pieces of **rock**, were first used for fashioning human dwellings. Later, humans found how to quarry and cut **stone**, such as granite and marble, for buildings.

b.

She used to consume **a cake** each week, on average, and two or three **sodas** and six **coffees** per day. She even drank **a soda** in the mid-morning, **a juice** between every meal, and **a coffee** in the evening while studying. She has made a habit of ordering **a water** with each restaurant meal instead of sugary drinks. She runs or walks a kilometer every day, does dumbbell exercises with **a 2 kg weight**.



Dumbbells

d.

At first it would have been hard to drag **a large rock** to build a primitive house, and the pieces might not fit together well to make a good house. Humans later learned to cut and transport stone from quarries to build buildings. In building the Egyptian pyramids, for example, **a large stone** could be carried on rollers or loose sand by a group of people. A normal piece of rock is simply **a rock**, or **a stone** in more formal or literary style. A large rock formation might also be referred to as **a stone**.

e.

Our kitchen inventory includes **fish, chicken, lamb**, rice, **onion, cucumber, pepper**, and **tomato**. Besides the main dish, we may want to provide **salad**.

f.

We have **a chicken** and **a lamb** in the barn, and **a fish** in the freezer. For each portion, the recipe requires a cup of rice, **an onion** and **a tomato**. To provide each person **a salad**, we also need **a cucumber** and **a tomato** for each portion.

g.

A chicken tried to cross the road to get to the other side. But my car hit **the chicken**, and now there is **chicken** all over the road.

2. Indefinite 'a' cf. null plurals

a.

She used to consume **a cake** each week, on average, and two sodas and six coffees per day. She even drank **a soda** in the mid-morning, **a juice** between every meal, and even **a coffee** in the evening while studying. Now, however, she orders **a water** with each restaurant meal instead of sugary drinks. She sometimes jogs, or does light dumbbell exercises with **a 2 kg weight**.

b.

The nutritionist advised her that she should stop eating **cakes** and drinking **sodas** and **juices**. She reduced her intake of instant and sweetened **coffees**, and instead has learned to appreciate drip or pressed **coffees** without sugar. Based on advice from her friend, she bought **some weights** for exercising.

c.

We have **a chicken** and **a lamb** in the barn, and **a fish** in the freezer. For each portion, the recipe requires a cup of rice, **an onion** and **a tomato**. To provide each person **a salad**, we also need **a cucumber** and **a tomato** for each portion.

d.

Our barn has a number of **chickens** and **lambs**, The vegetable garden has many **onions, cucumbers, peppers**, and **tomatoes**.

e.

Some chickens tried to cross the road to get to the other side. But my car hit **the chickens**, and now there is **chicken** all over the road.

3. Null singular cf. null plural

a.

Stone or **rock** have been used for human-made structures from the beginnings of human history. '**Rock**' is more often a geological term, or a term for everyday pieces of rock, while '**stone**' is more often a term for the material, especially for building materials that have been processed. **Rock**, as in large pieces of **rock**, were first used for fashioning human dwellings. Later, humans found how to quarry and cut **stone**, such as granite and marble, for buildings.

b.

It might be hard to drag **large rocks** to build a primitive house, and they might not fit together to make a good house. Humans later learned to cut **stones** from quarries, and found ways of transporting such **stones** to build buildings. In building the Egyptian pyramids, for example, **large stones** could be carried on rollers or loose sand by groups of people.

4. Indefinite 'a' cf. plurals (2)

a.

A **felid** is a member of the cat family, or Felidae. This group includes various cats: lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, snow leopards, cheetahs, lynxes, and others. A **lynx** is a **medium-sized wildcat** known for its reflective eyes. An **ocelot** is a **small wildcat** found in Central and South America, which was once prized for its fur.

b.

Male **lions** typically have large manes of hair, blond to black in color, from head to tail. Female **lions**, or **lionesses**, lack this large mane, but both have a long tail. Such gender differences are known as sexual dimorphism. Unlike other **felids** or **wildcats** (e.g., tigers, leopards, cheetahs, **lynxes**, and **ocelots**), only **lions** show obvious differences between males and females.

5. Indefinite cf. definite

a.

Farmer Brown went into his chicken coop to find his best chicken – a **large, white rooster** named Buster – to slaughter and prepare for tonight's dinner. Buster sometimes tried to escape, so he was kept in a **special cage**. He entered the coop, but didn't see Buster in his usual cage. He looked around the cages, and then to the corner of the room.

b.

Buster was not in any of **the cages**. However, **the rooster** was waiting in the corner with a knife in his hand, ready to take on **the farmer** in hand-to-hand combat.

6. Definite singular 'the' cf. indefinites & plurals (special uses)

a.

The cat family Felidae includes various cats: lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, snow leopards, **cheetahs**, lynxes, and others. **A lynx is a medium-sized wildcat** known for its reflective eyes. **An ocelot is a small wildcat** found in Central and South America, which was once prized for its fur.

c.

Lions are primarily nocturnal – sleeping during the day and active at night and even at twilight. They primarily live in savannas or grasslands, and some forests, but not necessarily in **jungles**.

e.

On our planet, **rooms** have **doors, walls, floors,** and **corners**. However, on the planet Epsilon Eridani 4, **rooms** are always round and lack **corners**. In the tropical environments of the planet Rigel 5, public buildings are built like wire **cages**, and thus lack **walls, floors** and **doors** in the normal sense.

g.

Computers consist of **hardware** such as **motherboards, processors,** hard drives, and **various cables** such as **SATA cables,** all in a **metal chassis**. **A typical computer** has a **RAM chip,** a chipset or sound card, a BIOS, and a **power supply**.

b.

The cheetah is the fastest land animal, capable of speeds to 120 kph and accelerating from 0 to 100 kph in 3 seconds. **The lynx is a medium-sized wildcat** known for its reflective eyes. **The ocelot,** found in Central and South America, is similar to domestic cats in size, and was once prized for its fur.

d.

In **the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion** sleeps tonight. Awimoweh, awimoweh...
Near the village, the peaceful village, **the lion** sleeps tonight. Awimoweh, awimoweh...
Hush my darling, don't fear my darling; **the lion** sleeps tonight. Awimoweh, awimoweh...

f.

He approached the chicken coop and opened **the door**. He looked around the room, and at **the cages** to check on **the hens** first, and then saw Buster's cage. Buster was not there. As **the moon** cast its light on **the bare floor**, he notice that some of his tools were missing on **the wall**. Then he saw Buster, waiting in **the corner** with a knife.

h.

When opening **the computer** to repair or upgrade the hardware, first disconnect **the power supply** and open **the chassis**. Take care to not touch **the motherboard, the processor,** or **the RAM chip** with your bare hands. Note where **the red cable** connects to **the motherboard** before you remove it – that is **the SATA cable,** which connects **the hard drive** to **the motherboard**.

7. Articles 'a/the' cf. null: Activities & events

a.

Aerobic **exercise** like **swimming**, bicycling, brisk **walking**, **jogging**, and rock **climbing** can be helpful for managing one's weight and for maintaining energy levels. Occasional extreme sports like **bungee jumping** may not contribute to weight management, but can offer other health benefits.

b.

Every two days I go for **a jog**, or if I am tired, then at least **a walk**. Occasionally I go for **a swim** or **a good climb** on a mountain near the city. **An exercise** that I also particularly enjoy is bicycling.

8. Definite 'the' cf. null: Complex noun phrases

a.

Modern physics has attempted to explain how **gravity**, **electricity**, **magnetism**, and the nuclear forces are related. The weak nuclear force has to do with **radiation** and radioactive decay, and the strong force holds nuclei together. Quantum physics has been able to bring **electromagnetism** and the nuclear forces into one theory, but not gravity. This gap is the purview of string theory.

b.

The gravity of Earth is described by the value of 9.81 m/s^2 , which assumes no air resistance; this is often called 'little g,' in contrast to 'big G,' the gravitational constant. **The electromagnetism of the Van Allen belts** around the Earth protect us from **the radiation of solar storms**.

c.

Modern **feminism** began as part of the abolitionist movement against slavery in the early to mid-1800s. More modern forms developed in Marxist countries, and contemporary feminist movements were a product of the social unrest and protests of the 1960s in the US and Europe.

d.

The feminism of the 19th century abolitionists was more grounded in religious arguments by progressive Christians. **The feminism of the 1960s** was clearly more secular, motivated by humanistic ideals, but **the feminism of contemporary North America and Europe** since then has always been shaped by religious elements as well.

e.

We really need more **support** here.

f.

I need **the support of all my employees** if our company is to survive into the next year. All **the support that you can offer** will be appreciated.

g.

Water is a polar molecule, and the electromagnetic attraction of the molecules to each other explains its surface tension.

h.

The water from this stream is cool and refreshing.

9. Definite 'the ' cf. indefinite 'a' (special uses)

a.

After stopping by **a colleague's lab** and **a friend's office**, I went to **a hospital** to see **a doctor** about my symptoms, but fortunately it wasn't serious. I took **a bus** home, and on my way I stopped by **a small store** to buy some snacks.

c.

I usually take **a bus** home, and occasionally, a taxi. In warm weather I may ride my bike to and from work.

e.

The male lion has **a head** covered with a large mane. **The tail** of both males and females ends in a tuft of hair.

g.

An orbit is an object's curved path around a point in space. **A heliocentric orbit** is an orbit around the sun. **A geocentric orbit** is one around the earth, such as for satellites, and **a geosynchronous orbit** is a **stationary orbit** over the earth.

i.

The hospital is located between **the old church** and **the school**.

b.

After stopping by **the lab** and **the office**, I went to **the hospital** to see **the doctor** about my symptoms, but fortunately it wasn't serious. I took **the bus** home, and on my way I stopped by **the store** to buy some snacks.

d.

I often go **by bus**, sometimes **by bike**, or occasionally **by taxi**.

f.

Male lions are characterized by a main running **from head to tail**.

h.

The earth is **in heliocentric orbit** around the sun. Various objects are in orbit around the Earth, that is, **in geocentric orbit**. Some satellites are **in geosynchronous orbit** around the earth. Other objects may be in other types of geocentric orbits, such as satellites **in medium-earth geocentric orbit**.

j.

She goes **to church** several times a week, sometimes before going **to school**.

10. Special oddity: What's the difference?

a.

I'm going to **the hospital**.
I'm staying at **the hospital**.
I'm in **the hospital**.

b.

I'm going to **hospital**.
I'm staying at **hospital**.
I'm in **hospital**.