

Definite & indefinite determiners (“articles”)

English has a definite article or determiner (‘the’), an indefinite article determiner (‘a/an’), and bare noun phrases with no such articles (bare nouns, also referred to as “null,” zero, or Ø determiners). East Asian students (and others from other languages that lack these grammatical forms) have difficulties with the English determiner system.

1. Basics: Indefinite ‘a/an’ cf. definite ‘the’ in context

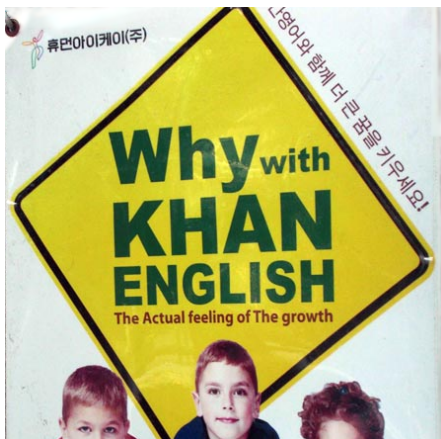
Let’s first review a few basic rules that you were probably taught before.

1.1. Basic rules #1

Why do these signs seem awkward?



Typical entrance sign at Seoul Forest



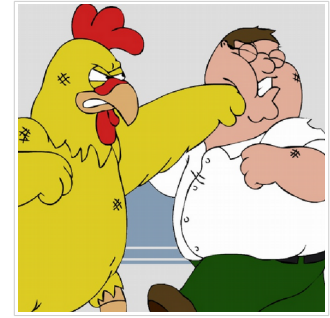
“The actual feeling of the growth” (Korean advertisement)



“I have refused **the entrance** into a room...”
(Japanese hotel sign)

There is one basic “rule” about *a* versus *the* that you have been taught, which is illustrated below. The first passage uses *a*, and the story continues in the next passage with *the*.

1. Farmer Brown went into his chicken coop¹ 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**.
2. 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. In fact, 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.



Patterns 1-2: *A/an* vs. *the*

What are the basic meaning (semantic) patterns for *a/an* versus *the*?

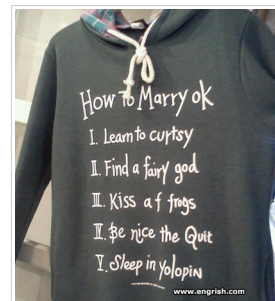
1. Indefinite *A/an*:

2. Definite *The*:

What is wrong with the determiners in the following products? (You may need to revise one of the patterns above.)



The box says, “This is an interesting toys...”
(Toy package from China)



“III. Kiss a frogs” (Korean sweatshirt)

¹ Coop = 닭장, (집승) 우리

1.2. How this affects meaning

Compare different versions of the following instructions. If the familiar noun marker is missing, is the text as understandable? Which version is more clear, and why? What specific difficulties do you find with the less clear versions? In your mind, how do you picture these differently when you read these different versions?

3. To properly assemble your new kitchen cabinet from Idea Furniture, first identify all the parts in the box. You will see two doors covered with protective film; two side panels; a cabinet top; drawer bottoms, side pieces, and back pieces; four door hinges; some larger hinge screws (black); and some smaller screws (silver). First, remove **the protective film**. Attach one drawer back to **a bottom piece**, and then attach **the side pieces** to **the bottom** and back; secure **the back and side pieces** with **the smaller screws**. Repeat these steps for **the second drawer**, and make sure you have assembled it just like **the other drawer**. Take one hinge, and attach **the triangular part** of **the door hinge** to one of **the side panels**, and secure it with **the black screws**. Do **the same** for **the other side panel**. Then put **one door** in place and connect **the hinge (the rectangular end)** to **the door** with **the black screws**. Do **the same** with **the other door** and **the hinge**. Set **the cabinet top** on top of **the assembled cabinet**, and secure it to **the side panels** with **the silver screws**.



4. To properly assemble your new kitchen cabinet from Idea Furniture, first identify all the parts in the box. You will see two doors covered with protective film; two side panels; a cabinet top; drawer bottoms, side pieces, and back pieces; four door hinges; some larger hinge screws (black); and some smaller screws (silver). First, remove **protective film**. Attach one drawer back to **bottom piece**, and then attach **side pieces** to **bottom** and back; secure **back and side pieces** with **smaller screws**. Repeat these steps for **second drawer**, and make sure you have assembled it just like **other drawer**. Take one hinge, and attach **triangular part** of **door hinge** to **side panel**, and secure it with **black screws**. Do **same** for **other side panel**. Then attach **door** and connect **hinge (rectangular ends)** to **door** with **black screws**. Do **same** with **other door** and **hinge**. Set **cabinet top** on top of **assembled cabinet**, and secure it to **side panels** with **silver screws**.
5. To properly assemble your new kitchen cabinet from Idea Furniture, first identify all the parts in the box. You will see two doors covered with protective film; two side panels; a cabinet top; drawer bottoms, side pieces, and back pieces; four door hinges; some larger hinge screws (black); and some smaller screws (silver). First, remove **protective film**. Attach one drawer back to a **bottom piece**, and then attach **side pieces** to a **bottom** and back; secure a **back and side pieces** with **smaller screws**. Repeat these steps for a **second drawer**, and make sure you have assembled it just like **another drawer**. Take one hinge, and attach a **triangular part** of a **door hinge** to a **side panel**, and secure it with **black screws**. Do **same** for **another side panel**. Then attach a **door** and connect a **hinge (a rectangular end)** to a **door** with **black screws**. Do **same** for **another door** and a **hinge**. Set a **cabinet top** on top of an **assembled cabinet**, and secure it to **side panels** with **silver screws**.

1.3. Basic patterns

We can summarize the basic patterns between *a/an* and *the* as a contrast between the following meanings.

Pattern 1: Indefinite



A/an: Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

Pattern 2: Definite



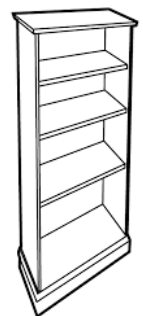
The: Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

1.4. Exercise 1

Write a set of simple instructions for assembling a new desk or bookshelf (or verbally explain how to assemble one of these).

1. Desk: 1 top board, 2 small drawers, 2 large drawers, 1 long center drawer, 5 drawer knobs, 6 legs, 1 back panel, screws
2. Bookshelf: 1 heavy base board (for the very bottom), 1 bottom shelf, 3 middle shelves, 1 top shelf, left and right side panels, 1 back panel, 4 plastic protectors (underneath the bottom), 2 short and 2 long trim pieces (long, thin pieces of wood that cover the base board), screws



1.5. Exceptions?

Do we always follow this pattern of *a/an* + first mention, and *the* + subsequent mention? Is this a “hard rule” of English grammar? What are some examples that you have seen, or some contexts where you have seen violations of this?

For example, the following examples would be perfectly correct. These are not “exceptions,” but rather, different kinds of patterns that express different meanings.

6. We surveyed 120 graduate students, and found the following. **A typical graduate student** expects to find an academic job after finishing his/her Ph.D.

7. We surveyed 120 graduate students, and found the following. **The typical graduate student** expects to find an academic job after finishing his/her Ph.D.

Later we will see instances where *a/an* may be used with new or old nouns, and some specialized uses of *the/a/an* that are not explained well in your textbooks.

1.6. Basic rule: Count vs. non-count nouns?

Does the use of nouns marked with *a/an* or *the* versus bare nouns (with no determiner) depend on the distinction between count and non-count nouns? Is the count/non-count distinction always clear or helpful? Consider the following.

8. Most students cannot get through college without **support** from their families.

9. I need **the support** of all my employees.

10. The highway ramp was help up by **a support** that weakened over time.

11. Animals need **water** to survive.

12. **The water** on Mars contains salts and harmful chemicals.

13. **Artificial intelligence** holds great promise for solving humankind’s problems.

14. **An artificial intelligence** that could solve our problems might make us lazy as a species.

15. **The artificial intelligence** seen in science fiction shows is sometimes viewed with suspicion.

In the following sections, we will see why this distinction does not necessarily work, but that the apparent distinction and apparent exceptions are due to different meaning patterns and uses.

2. Bare singular (Ø) vs. marked singular nouns (*a/an, the*)

What could be wrong with this sign?



Sign outside a Korea University student cafeteria.

Take a look at the noun phrases below. Are the nouns count or non-count nouns? What patterns in meaning or nuance do you see when you compare the different patterns?

1. water



a water



2. coffee



a coffee



3. juice



a juice



4. salad



a salad



5. chicken



a chicken



6. tape



a tape



also a tape



7. weight



a weight



8. iron



an iron



How do you understand the differences in these food descriptions?

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



10. 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.



How do you understand the different forms of the nouns in these passages?

11. **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.

12. I ordered **chicken**, but I think **the chicken** that I got was not from **a chicken**. Instead, I suspect it was **pigeon**, which came from **a pigeon** or a group of pigeons.

💡 *What do you picture in your mind when you think of these types of nouns and determiner patterns?*

What is the pattern here? What is the difference in meaning or nuance between these bare singular nouns and those with determiners like *a/an*?

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)



A/an/the =

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)



Ø bare noun (singular) =

As it turns out, many nouns can alternate between bare singular noun and object noun meanings. How do the meanings or nuances differ for these nouns when they are used as bare singular nouns, or as marked singular nouns (e.g., with *a/an*)?

- | | | | |
|-----|--------|--------|---------|
| 13. | soda | salad | rock |
| | cake | pizza | wood |
| | coffee | pepper | brick |
| | beer | orange | paper |
| | juice | duck | diamond |

How about these pairs – how do they contrast? Which of these nouns generally occur as bare nouns or marked nouns? How do their meanings or nuances differ?

- | | | |
|-----|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 14. | chicken, duck, goose | poultry |
| | cow | beef |
| | pig | pork |
| | sheep | mutton |
| 15. | animal | wildlife, game (=hunted animals) |
| | feather | plumage |
| | human | humankind, humanity |
| | leaf | foliage |
| 16. | carpet | carpeting |
| | fence | fencing |
| | pipe | plumbing |
| | rail | railing |
| | wire | wiring |



a rail, or railing

- | | | |
|-----|----------|------------|
| 17. | bullet | ammunition |
| | suitcase | luggage |
| | thing | stuff |

Can the following be used as plurals? Why or why not? How could we talk about these as plural objects?

- 18.
- furniture
 - equipment
 - staff
 - faculty
 - personnel

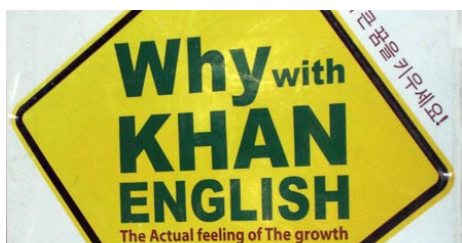
3. Extensions of bare singular versus marked noun patterns

3.1. Nouns for actions

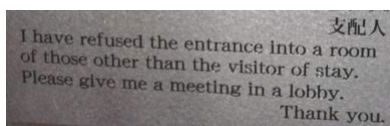
Without any context, are these signs clear?



“The theft is increasing.” A sign inside a restroom at Tokyo Haneda Airport.



“The actual feeling of the growth” (Korean advertisement)



“I have refused the entrance into a room...” (Japanese hotel sign)

The following shows a special contrast between bare singular nouns and nouns marked with *a/an*. Can you guess the pattern or how these differ?

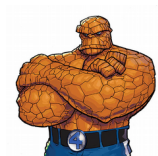
1. Aerobic **exercise** like **swimming**, bicycling, brisk **walking**, **jogging**, and rock **climbing** can be helpful for managing one's weight and for maintaining energy levels. Occasional extreme sports like **bungee jumping** may not contribute to weight management, but can offer psychological benefits.
2. 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. A couple of times a year, **a good bungee jump** provides a good catharsis and stress release.



💡 *How do you picture these descriptions in your mind differently?*

What is the difference between *a* + noun versus the bare noun? When the basic distinction between the marked and bare nouns is extended to nouns for actions – events and activities – a what is the distinction?

Pattern 3a: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)



A/an/the =

- Thing / object

Extended pattern:

→ _____



Pattern 4a: Singular bare noun (Ø)



Singular bare noun (Ø) =

- Material / substance

Extended pattern:

→ _____



Of course, subsequent mentions of an event can be marked with *the*, and multiple occurrences of an event can be plural.

3. I went to a mountain north of the city for **a climb** this morning, and **the climb** was quite exhilarating.
4. Over time, **many climbs** make me feel less stressed.
5. Over time, all **the climbs** that I've done make me feel less stressed.

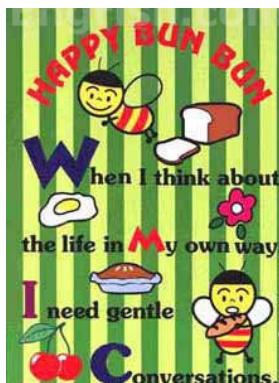


3.2. Exercise 2

Write a summary of your favorite movie. What events or scenes in the movie were memorable, and why? What aspects of the movie were memorable, interesting, or unique?

3.3. Abstract terms

What is awkward about this sign?



“When I think about the life in my own way, I need gentle conversations.”

The following nouns are more often unmarked with *a/an/the*, and their more common default use may be as bare singular nouns.

1. If I could find some peace / To take the place of **hate** and **war** / All we need is **peace** / Just to take the place of **hate** and **war**. (Lyrics to *Peace and love* by Marvin Winans, 2009)
2. **Joy** and **pain** are like sunshine and rain / Over and over you can be sure / There will be **sorrow** but you will endure. (Lyrics to *Joy and pain* by Maze, 1980)

What is the general pattern for abstract nouns?

Pattern 4b: Singular bare noun (Ø)



Singular bare noun (Ø) = *Extended pattern:*

- Material / substance

→ _____

3.4. Marking a material noun

In these examples, a bare material noun can be marked with a determiner, especially the indefinite *a/an*, or can be made plural. What does this do to the meaning of the noun?

1. A cheese that I really like is Gouda.
2. Gouda is a cheese that tickles the palette.
3. Holland produces many fine cheeses.

4. Bare plural nouns

What is wrong or awkward about the following examples?



A sign outside a store in Tokyo Haneda Airport.



“This is dog!” (Japanese T-shirt)



Signs in a commercial building in Seoul

4.1. Basic bare plural pattern

How are the following nouns different between the marked singulars and the bare plurals?

1. We have **a chicken** and **a lamb** in the barn, and **a fish** in the freezer. **The fish** is fresh, and **the chicken** is plump. 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.



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



When you go shopping, how do you usually buy the following items – as singular or plural nouns?



💬 *In what kind of contexts would you see this kind of use of bare plural nouns? What do you picture in your mind when you think of these types of noun patterns?*

Now try to summarize the pattern for these bare plural nouns.

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)



Plural bare nouns (Øs) =

What do we sometimes do for specific plural nouns?

3. As I was driving along a country road, **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.

4.2. Exercise 3

Imagine you are writing a shopping list of items to buy. Which items would you write as a bare singular noun (materials, substances), as a bare marked noun (an individual item), or as a bare plural noun (a set, group, or package of things)?



Shopping list		
(A) Bare singular nouns	(B) Bare plural nouns	(C) Marked singular nouns

4.3. Bare plural nouns: Extended pattern

What do the following pictures and diagram show?

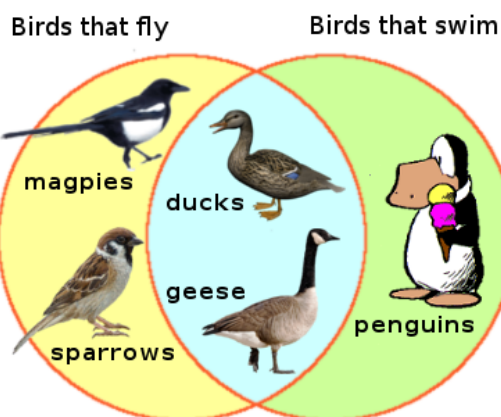
4. a bird



6. a bird



5. birds that fly or swim



7.

What pattern(s) do you notice here? What is the meaning of these bare plural nouns compared to marked singular nouns (with *a/the*)? In what contexts do we normally use bare plural nouns like this?

In what kind of text would you read the following types of bare plural nouns? What is the purpose of such sentences? What are some other possible situations where nouns would be described in such a way?

8. 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 **lions** do not generally in jungles.
9. **Penguins** are a group of aquatic, flightless birds. They live almost exclusively in the Southern Hemisphere, with only one species found north of the equator. Highly adapted for life in the water, **penguins** have dark and white plumage, and their wings have evolved into flippers. Most **penguins** feed on krill, fish, squid and other forms of sealife caught while swimming underwater. They spend about half of their lives on land and half in the oceans. Although almost all **penguins** are native to the Southern Hemisphere, they are not found only in cold climates, such as Antarctica. In fact, only a few species of penguin live so far south. Several species are found in the temperate zone, and one species, the Galápagos penguin, lives near the equator. Larger **penguins** inhabit colder regions, while smaller **penguins** are generally found in temperate or even tropical climates².

Now summarize the pattern of usage here for bare plurals.

Pattern 5a: Plural bare nouns (Øs)



Plural bare nouns (Øs) = *Extended pattern:*



→ _____

² Adapted from the Wikipedia entry on penguins.

4.4. Exercise 4

Write an encyclopedia-style description of your favorite animal or plant (including how it is similar to, related to, or different from other species).

5. Indefinite 'a/an' – special uses

The following sentences illustrate a special use of *a/an* – what is the meaning or nuance in these examples? What is the pattern here?

1. I need **a good book** to read.
2. This is not **a time** for sleeping.
3. I want **a man** who knows what love is, but all the men I've known were losers.
4. Graduate students tend not to sleep much. In fact, **a typical graduate student** like me drinks at least a liter of coffee per day.
5. Molecules can be polar, like magnets. **A molecule** of water, for example, contains positively and negatively charged ends.

💡 *How do you picture these in your mind?*

How would you explain the pattern for this new use of indefinites?

Pattern 1a: Indefinite



A/an: Indefinite =

- New or **unfamiliar**
- Singular item / thing

Extended pattern:

→ _____

This usage is extended to the following kind of contexts. Are the nouns marked with 'a/an' in bold font in these examples always new in these contexts? Where would you see these descriptions, and what is the purpose of these sentences?

6. Lions belong to the cat family, which also 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.
7. Amazon is an example of a revolutionary new service that was created by a visionary entrepreneur – the type of person that is known as a first-mover. **A first-mover** is **a person** who first develops and markets **an entirely new product** or service.

💡 *How do you picture these in your mind?*

Why are these indefinite (with *a/an*)? What is the meaning pattern, and nuances do these convey?

Pattern 1b: Indefinite



A/an: Indefinite =

- New or **unfamiliar**
- Singular item / thing

Extended patterns:

→ _____

→ _____

6. Definite ‘the’: Special types of context

You were probably taught to use *the* on a noun that has been mentioned in the context. But how about the following example – what assumption does the speaker make?

6.1. Special context 1

1. “This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take **the blue pill**—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take **the red pill**—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth. Nothing more.”



This famous movie quote makes sense out of context, either if you know it, or if you see the famous scene that goes with it. So why do the phrases *the red pill* and *the blue pill* make sense here?

6.2. Special context 2

In these cases, what makes the noun familiar or identifiable? How do these phrases make the nouns familiar identifiable, even when the nouns were not previously mentioned?

2. **The better option** would be to chose **the more expensive model**.
3. **The best vacation** that I ever had was in northern Europe; that was **the most fun** I’ve ever had. **The second best one** was when we went to Florida.
4. That was not **the first time**, and it won’t be **the last**.
5. He’s just **the same** as he was before his operation.
6. Excuse me, but could you tell me where **the nearest restroom** is?
7. She is one of **the most optimistic persons** that I have ever known.
8. **The very thing** that I told him not to do, well, he did it. (here, *very* = emphatic adjective)
9. **The truth** itself will overcome falsehood. (here, *itself* = emphatic pronoun)

The *more/-er* forms are comparatives, and the *most/-est* forms are superlatives. What do they do to the meaning? Also, some different nuances are possible, especially with comparative adjectives. (Why?)

10. **The better option** would be to chose **the more expensive model**.
11. **A better option** would be to chose **a more expensive model**.

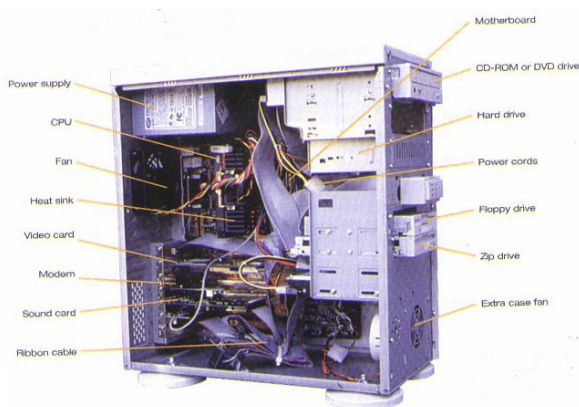
💡 *How do you picture these in your mind? What do they imply?*

6.3. Special context 3

Compare the two sample texts about computers.

(A general encyclopedia-style description of computers):

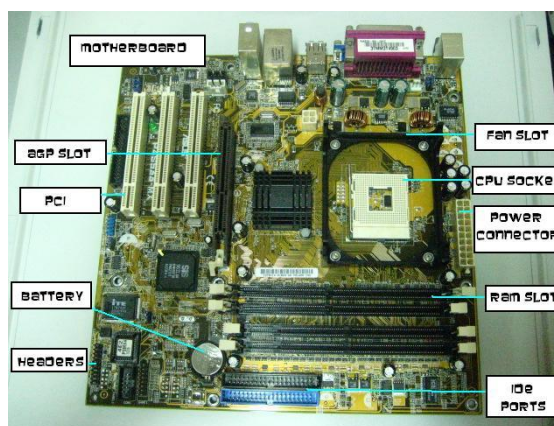
12. **Computers** consist of **components** such as **motherboards**, **processors**, hard drives, and **various cables** such as **SATA cables**, all in a **metal chassis**. A **typical computer** has a **RAM chip**, a chipset or sound card, a BIOS, and a **power supply**.



Do you know these parts?

(An article explaining how to do maintenance work on a computer):

13. 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**.



Why does the slightly more technical version on the right use *the* instead of *a/an*? For whom would it be written?

💭 *How do you picture this in your mind differently with the definite ('the') marked nouns?*

So what is the pattern of usage for definite nouns here so far?

Pattern 2a: Definite



The: Definite =

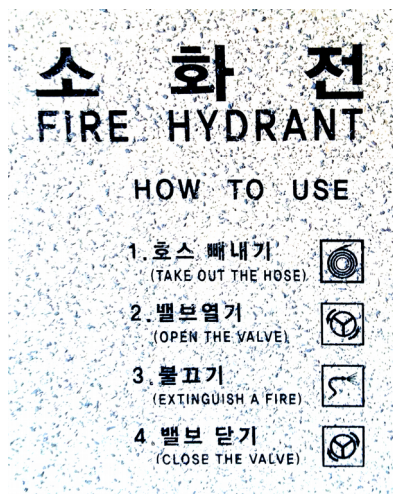
- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended pattern(s):

→

6.4. Special context 4

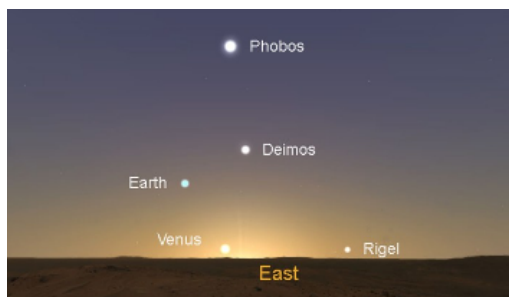
Why is the following sign slightly awkward?



“3. Extinguish a fire.”

The following are a bit harder, but they are essentially similar, and they use *the* for a good reason.

14. 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 noticed that some of his tools were missing on **the wall**. Then he saw Buster, waiting in **the corner** with a knife.
15. When I came to my office today, I found that **the photocopier** and **the printer** were both broken, and **the secretary** was sick.
16. I usually take a bus to work, or a train when **the weather** is bad.
17. If I could go back in time to watch Mozart compose in his home, and if I could be a fly **on the wall**, watching him in the process of composing, I would probably see him discarding many bad compositions before creating a truly great one.
18. Outside we see **the sun** and **the moon**. But on other planets we might see two **suns** and two or more **moons**.



The two moons of Mars



Double sunset on Tatooine (Luke Skywalker’s home planet in Star Wars)



How do you picture these in your mind when you read these descriptions? What else do you see in your mind along with the nouns that were mentioned?

Why is *the* used on new nouns in the examples above? When and why, for example, do we use *the* when referring to parts of a room or building? Consider the following unusual situation for comparison.

19. I wish that my room had a floor.
I don't care so much for a door,
But this walking around
Without touching the ground
Is getting to be such a bore.

How can a noun can be considered familiar or identifiable in the types of contexts that we've seen above? What then is the pattern with these uses of *the*?

Pattern 2b: Definite



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity
or thing(s)

Extended pattern(s):

→

6.5. Group / part expressions

Why would the following sentence be incorrect or awkward?

20. ☹ We saw a litter of puppies, and decided to buy **the puppy** and take it home.



Litter =

함께 태어난 강아지들,
한 배에서 난 새끼들

6.6. Exercise 5

Write out some simple instructions for assembling the components of a new computer system.



6.7. Exercise 6

Think of a typical office or workplace. What are some things that you would see in a typical office? (Write in your description in complete sentences.)



6.8. Special context: Implied familiarity

We have a few more special types of contexts, which are difficult. The following type is difficult to predict from context, and it seems to depend mainly on the speaker's perspective, rather than the listener's.

21. Many students in Korea struggle with these problems with definite and indefinite articles in learning English. Unfortunately, **the various grammar books and language textbooks** cannot explain these phenomena.

Without any prior context or mention of the nouns, these nouns are indicated as familiar or known to the reader with 'the.' Why? How could they be interpreted in light of the principles from the preceding section?



Pattern 2b: Definite



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended patterns (addition):

→ 'The' = _____ background knowledge (especially in formal, specialized, academic or technical contexts.)

6.9. Special context: First mention, narrative

This shows a specialized use of *the* in narrative writing. Had this definite noun phrase been mentioned before? Was it predictable from the context?

22. She biked along the path as she had done every morning, and everything seemed as usual. As she rounded the corner, she looked up and noticed **the snow-capped mountain peaks**, which towered over the plains. She recalled climbing those peaks when she was young, when she would scale the rock face and stand at the summit to view the entire valley from above.

6.10. Summary

Now try to summarize the various specialized uses of *the* so far.

Pattern 2a-b: Definite



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended patterns (revised): Special contexts with 'the'

→ A noun can be considered familiar or identifiable in special contexts like the following:

7. Definite 'the' – Complex noun phrases as specifiers

In a previous section, we say how specifiers before the noun can mark the noun as more familiar. These are noun phrases that are followed by prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and other structures, known as post-modifiers, because they modify the nouns that they follow. We first see this with nouns (or adjectives before nouns) that describe properties, states, or conditions. Compare these examples on the left and right sides.

Indefinite

1. **Redness** can be a sign of a number of different skin problems.
3. **Sadness** and **feelings of darkness** can be normal.

Definite

2. **The redness of your face** seems serious, and you really should see a doctor.
4. **The sadness** and **the feelings of darkness** that you've experienced lately could be a sign of a more serious depression.

Do you see a pattern here? Now consider the following – do these sound like possible expressions in English?

5. the support
6. the feminism
7. the gravity
8. the love

We also see this with more abstract nouns, and such phrases are especially common in academic English. There are some scientific terms here, so do not worry too much about understanding these passages.

Indefinite

9. We are in serious danger of failing or collapsing. We really need more **support** here.
11. **Love** is a basic psychological need.
13. **Water** is a bipolar molecule, and the electromagnetic attraction of the molecules to each other explains its surface tension.

Definite

10. 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.
12. He is in despair, for **the love of his life** has left him, and she has scorned **the love that he offered her**.
14. **The water from this tank** is contaminated with E. coli bacteria.

Indefinite

15. 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.
17. 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.

Definite

16. **The feminism of the 19th century abolitionists** was sometimes grounded in religious arguments offered by these progressives. **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 been shaped by various secular and sometimes religious ideals.
18. **The gravitational force of Earth** is described by **the value of 9.81 m/s²**, which assumes no air resistance; this is often called 'little g,' in contrast to 'big G,' **the gravitational constant of Newton's law**.
19. **The electromagnetism of the Van Allen belts** around the Earth protects us from **the radiation of solar storms**.

What kind of pattern is going on here? What is different between the nouns in the left and right side examples?

Pattern 2e: Definite + post-modified noun



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended pattern:

→ _____

Now compare the following examples of *a* + post-modifier (or post-specifier) and \emptyset + post-modifier. How can we explain why these are not preceded by *the*? Why do similar noun phrases here occur sometimes with *a/an* and sometimes with *the*?

20. Psychodynamic therapy is **a traditional form of psychotherapy** developed by Freud and others after him. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is **a type of therapy** based on more recent advances in psychology, in which a patient is lead to confront her unhealthy views and change them in order to change her behavior.
21. **The type of therapy for typical disorders that** research psychologists recommend is cognitive behavior therapy.
22. **A first mover** is **a person who creates and markets** an entirely new product or service.
23. A first mover is not necessarily **the one who is most successful**.
24. **Water in a normal state** has an electrostatic charge.
25. **The water of Mars** may be too salty for humans to drink directly.

26. **A molecule** *of water* contains positively charged (H⁺) and negatively charged (O⁻) ends. **A lot** *of water molecules* stick together because of their electrostatic charge.

28. The two spies played **a game** *of cat-and-mouse*, until Sergei was eventually found out and arrested.

27. **The molecular structure** *of water molecules* causes H₂O molecules to cling together electrically.

29. **The game** *of Monopoly* was invented in 1903.

How is it that these nouns can show different determiner patterns within the same paragraph? Two possible variations are shown here.

30. Graduate students can have difficult lives, with all their research and studying. **A successful graduate student**, *one who can publish* in a major journal, is likely to find a good job.

31. Graduate students can have difficult lives, with all their research and studying. **The graduate student** *who finishes* her Ph.D. and soon publishes in a major journal is likely to find a good job.

Some post-modified nouns might be definitions or general descriptions, rather than nouns that indicate a specific type, instance, or example. Notice how definitions and descriptions can use different determiner patterns to achieve different nuances.

Examples

32. **The philosophy** *of science* deals with **the goals and purposes** *of science and scientific research*.

33. **A philosopher** *of science* may pose **questions** *about science* that can ultimately help the general public better understand the role of science in society.

34. **Philosophers** *of science* may pose **questions** *about science* that can ultimately help the general public better understand the role of science in society.

8. Definite 'the' – special uses

The following is a special use of *the* in narrative contexts, which is also used sometimes in academic writing.

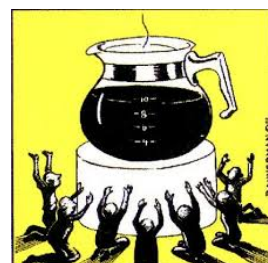
8.1. Type 1

Why does the famous pop song below start with *the*? And why does *the* in the following example (from academic writing) make sense?

1. In **the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion** sleeps tonight.
Aweemoweh, aweemoweh ...
Near **the village, the peaceful village, the lion** sleeps tonight.
Aweemoweh, aweemoweh ...
Hush my darling, don't fear, my darling, **the lion** sleeps tonight.
Aweemoweh, aweemoweh ... ³



2. Our survey study found that graduate students tend not to sleep much. In fact, **the typical graduate student** drinks at least a half liter of coffee per day.



💬 *How do you picture these in your mind?*

What is the pattern here with these uses of *the*? How does it contrast with the background scene / background knowledge functions in the previous section? For example, how does your mental imagery work differently here as you read and understand the examples above?

Pattern 2c: Definite



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended patterns:

→ _____

→ _____

³ “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” is a pop song made most famous in 1961 by a band called The Tokens.

8.2. Type 2

This use of *the* is also extended to a particular genre. Compare the bare plural for general descriptions (left side) with this use of *the* (right side).

3. **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**.
4. **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.

What is the pattern here with these uses of *the*?

Pattern 2d: Definite



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended patterns:

→ _____

→ _____

8.3. Comparison

Now compare this with the standard definition style with *a/an*. It may seem confusing that we have several different ways of rendering descriptions and definitions with *a*, *the*, and bare nouns. How do these three differ in nuance and usage?

5. **A lion** is a **nocturnal feline** that lives in savannas.
6. **Lions** are **nocturnal felines** that lives in savannas.
7. **The lion** is a **nocturnal feline** that lives in savannas.

8. **Professors** are creatures that live for studying, research, publishing, and teaching.
9. **The typical professor** drinks at least a liter of coffee daily.
10. **A typical professor** drinks at least a liter of coffee daily.

9. Specialized uses of definite ‘the’ and bare nouns

9.1. Definite ‘the’

Here we have several specialized uses that are particularly difficult, and the various grammar books, textbooks, and reference books do not know how to explain these well. What special nuance is conveyed by the definite nouns with *the* below?

Indefinite

1. 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.

Definite

2. 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 milk.

9.2. Bare nouns

Now compare the definite nouns with bare nouns in the following examples. What nuances or types of meaning are conveyed by the bare nouns below?

Definite / indefinite

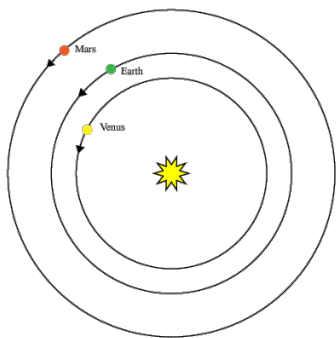
3. The hospital is located between **the old church** and **the school**.
5. The male lion has **a head** covered with a large mane. **The tail** of both males and females ends in a tuft of hair.
7. **The start** of such a race is easy; it’s **the finish** that’s hard.

Bare noun

4. She goes **to church** several times a week, sometimes before going **to school**, while her roommate goes to **temple**.
6. We checked the lions’ hair **from head to tail**, and found no parasites.
8. He ran the race from **start** to **finish**.

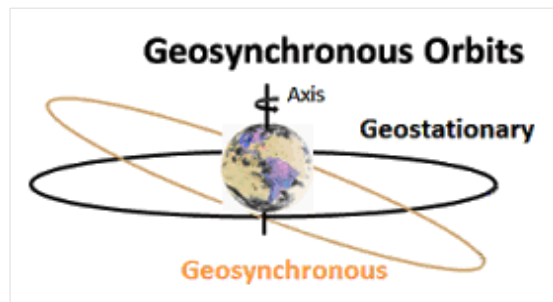
Definite / indefinite

9. **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.



Bare noun

10. 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**.



9.3. Altogether

11. I usually take **a bus** home, and occasionally, **a taxi**. In warm weather I may ride my bike to and from work.
12. I often go to work **by train** or **by bus**. If the weather is nice, I sometimes commute **by bike**, or if it's particularly bad, then **by taxi**.
13. I usually take **the bus** to work, or **the train** when the weather is bad.
14. Car and train are the most convenient means, but driving can be boring or stressful here.

9.4. Special oddity

What does this show about how North American and British speakers conceptualize this term?

North American English

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

British English

16. I'm going to **hospital**.
18. I'm staying at **hospital**.
20. I'm in **hospital**.

Pattern 2f: Definite



The: Definite =

- **Familiar / known** entity or thing(s)

Extended pattern:

→ _____

Pattern 4c: Singular bare noun (Ø)



Singular bare noun (Ø) =

- Material / substance

Extended patterns:

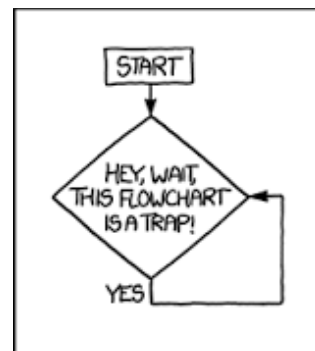
→ Abstract nouns

→ _____

10. Compound nouns

How do you choose the right determiner patterns for compound nouns such as the following? What determines the semantic (meaning) properties and usage of these expressions?

1. **The computer manual** uses **a rather unclear flow chart** to illustrate **RAM chip installation**. In fact, **the entire chapter** on **motherboard installation** is written like it's supposed to be either **a weird stream-of-consciousness novel** or **an April Fool's joke**.
2. **A chemical engineer** wants to devise **a system** for extracting **carbon dioxide** from **the atmosphere** and turning **the carbon** into **carbon nanotubes**.
3. Properly speaking, is **a wildlife photographer** **a person** who photographs **wildlife**, or could it also refer to **wildlife animals** that take pictures?



A wildlife photographer?

What is the pattern here? What determines the determiner patterns of compound nouns and abbreviated noun phrases?

Pattern 6: Compound nouns



Compound nouns

10.1. Abbreviations

Now how about abbreviations – i.e., abbreviated compound expressions?

4. **The CIA** has a different jurisdiction here than **the FBI**, and we have no clue about what **the NSA** is supposed to do here.

(CIA = the Central Intelligence Agency; FBI = the Federal Bureau of Investigation; NSA = National Security Agency)

How does the compound noun pattern apply to abbreviations? Can you think of other examples of abbreviations in context?

Note: A few abbreviations have come to be treated as proper nouns rather than as abbreviations, e.g.:

5. **NASA** has delayed its plans for its next mission to Mars.

10.2. Place names

A few place names curiously use *the* for reasons that books usually do not make clear. These are best understood as compound phrases where a common geographic term has been omitted.

6. **The Amazon** is still a fairly unexplored place, as is **the Congo**.

(The Amazon = The Amazon River, the Amazon Basin, the Amazon region; the Congo = the Congo River or the Congo region)

11. Final exercise

Your group is going to produce your own independent movie. What items do you need to budget for? Explain the items you need and why you need them. This can include equipment for filming, for the set or location where it will be filmed, personnel, and editing equipment.



11.1. Summary

Now try to summarize the different patterns and functions of these determiner + noun patterns. You can draw a mind map, chart, or other graphical aid if it helps you.

1. Bare singular nouns

2. Bare plural nouns

3. A/an

4. The