

1. Find a good ESL grammar book and dictionary and study them regularly.
2. Use an English-only dictionary (rather than a Spanish-English dictionary, for example).
3. Read, speak, and write in English as much as you can. You might even try sometimes reading out loud.
4. Work on speaking English correctly. Find a native English-speaking friend who will agree to talk with you in English and correct any errors that you make in your spoken English. Also, he or she can help explain things about the language.

I believe that if you make these suggestions regular habits, your ability to use the English language is bound to improve dramatically (but it may take some time).

## GRAMMAR REVIEW

The following pages contain a short review of four of the most common grammatical areas of difficulty for ESL writers. This review is not meant to be comprehensive, so you may still want to be sure you possess a strong ESL grammar book (I suggest some books at the end of this chapter).

## ARTICLES AND QUANTITY WORDS

Other languages do not use articles the way that English does (some, in fact, don't have articles), so if you are a nonnative English speaker, you may find articles to be particularly troublesome. Commonly, article usage is one of the last things for a nonnative speaker to master. Although you will learn rules here to help you use articles, many exceptions and fine distinctions exist. Don't expect to learn a rule, apply it, and then never make another error again. Learning to use articles correctly takes a long time; however, this short guide should help you become a more conscious article user.

### General guidelines for using articles

Before you know which article to use, I suggest following this sequence of questions. For common nouns (not proper nouns, that is, specific persons, places, or things that begin with a capital letter) ask:

1. Is the noun a **count noun** or a **noncount noun**?

A **count noun** is something that can be counted or divided. To test whether a noun is count or noncount, try putting a number in front of it and see if it makes sense (for example, *dog—two dogs, shoe—fifty shoes*). Count nouns can be singular or plural.

**Noncount nouns** are nouns that can't be counted or divided and can be in only a singular form. Notice that it does not make sense to put a number in front of a noncount noun (*three rice, fifteen poetry*). Sometimes these nouns are called *mass nouns* (for example, *air, hair, advice, furniture, wine, grass*).

2. Is the noun **specific** (or definite) or **nonspecific** (indefinite)?

A **specific** reference is known by the writer and the reader as something unique, specific, familiar, or previously identified to the reader.

A **nonspecific** reference is not identified by the writer and by the reader as something known, unique, or familiar.

Watch out: Whether a noun is specific or nonspecific is often determined by the context.

3. Is the noun **singular** or **plural**?

Of course, this applies only to count nouns.

Knowing this information about a common noun, use the chart that follows to see which article to use.

Type of Noun	For Common Nouns	
	Specific	Nonspecific
Count Singular	the	a/an
Count Plural	the	No article with a generalization
Noncount	the	No article with a generalization

4. Is the noun a **proper noun**? A **proper noun** is the name of a specific person, place, or thing (for example, *Austin, Taco Bell, Mexico*) and begins with a capital letter. For the most part, singular proper nouns are not preceded by an article, and plural proper nouns are preceded by the definite article, *the* (for example, *the Great Lakes*). Many times this general rule doesn't apply because there are idiomatic conventions for usage.

**EXAMPLES OF ARTICLE USAGE:**

Noun: train (common count noun)

- |            |                        |   |
|------------|------------------------|---|
| the train  | (singular specific)    | I saw the train that comes from Houston.          |
| a train    | (singular nonspecific) | I saw a train yesterday.                          |
| the trains | (plural specific)      | I went to visit the trains at the Amtrak station. |
| trains     | (plural nonspecific)   | Trains pass by every night from midnight to dawn. |

Noun: rice (common noncount noun)

- |          |               |  |
|----------|---------------|--|
| the rice | (specific)    | The rice in the bowl is stale.           |
| rice     | (nonspecific) | Rice has the tendency to stick together. |

Noun: music (common noncount noun)

- |           |               |   |
|-----------|---------------|---|
| the music | (specific)    | The music my sister makes is beautiful. |
| music     | (nonspecific) | Music is the highest form of art.       |

## Quantity words

Quantity words modify the noun by pointing to how many or how much there is of the noun. Some quantity words can be used only with a particular class of noun (either uncountable, singular countable, or plural countable). Others can be used with both uncountable nouns and countable plural nouns. The chart that follows outlines the proper usage:

### QUANTITY WORDS

*With countable singular nouns  
(boy, cat, device)*

each  
every  
another

*With countable plural nouns  
(boys, cats, devices)*

several  
(not) many  
a few  
(very) few  
fewer

*With uncountable nouns  
(fruit, oil, wood)*

a great deal of  
(not) much  
a little  
(very) little  
less

*With countable plural nouns  
and with uncountable nouns*

some	no
any	not any
a lot of	other
lots of	

### Common Noncount Nouns

advertising	clothing	happiness	milk	satisfaction
advice	coal	health	money	scenery
air	coffee	homework	music	silver
anger	confidence	honesty	news	snow
bacon	corn	ice	oil	soap
baggage	courage	information	oxygen	soup
beauty	dirt	intelligence	paper	steel
beef	economics	jelly	pasta	sugar
biology	employment	jewelry	pepper	toast
broccoli	equipment	juice	petroleum	truth
butter	flour	knowledge	physics	violence
cabbage	food	lamb	poetry	wealth
candy	fruit	love	politics	weather
celery	fun	luggage	pollution	wine
cement	furniture	lumber	poverty	wood
cereal	gold	mail	rain	wool
cheese	gravy	mathematics	rice	work
chicken	ham	meat	salt	yogurt

To express number with noncount nouns you need quantity words. For example:

- a good deal** of rice      **two pieces** of gold  
**a lot** of fun              **a little** celery

## MISCELLANEOUS USES OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE (*the*)

### DO NOT USE *THE*

- 1) Mountains—Mt. Shasta, Mr. Rainier
- 2) Parks—Memorial Park, Olmos Park
- 3) Cities, states, countries, continents, single places—Dallas, Utah, Mexico, South America, Lake LBJ, Mustang Island, Omaha Beach
- 4) Magazines—*Newsweek*, *Atlantic Monthly*
- 5) Directions—north, south, east, west
- 6) Names of colleges or universities without *of*—Austin College, Southwestern, San Antonio College
- 7) Diseases—cancer, diabetes, polio
- 8) Personal names—James Joyce
- 9) Constellations and heavenly bodies—Mercury, Vega, Orion's Belt, Halley's Comet
- 10) Games and sports—tennis, poker, football

### USE *THE*

- 1) Mountain ranges—the Alps, the Rockies
- 2) Zoos—the National Zoo
- 3) Collective and plural names—the United States, the House Banking Committee, the United Kingdom, the Great Lakes, the Aleutian Islands
- 4) Newspapers—the *Houston Chronicle*
- 5) Sections of a country or city—the Panhandle, the west side
- 6) Names of colleges or universities with *of*—The University of Texas at Austin
- 7) Ailments—the flu, a headache, a cold, a fever
- 8) Families—the Joyce family
- 9) Exceptions—the sun, the moon, the earth, the Big Dipper, the Milky Way
- 10) Musical instruments—the saxophone, the violin

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT VERB TENSE



Do you often have trouble picking the right verb tense to use? Native speakers use verbs intuitively, but if you are a nonnative speaker you may still have to think hard when choosing your verb tense, even after years of studying English. The chart that follows will help you understand each separate verb tense and what it describes. Included in the chart, also, are “time words” commonly used with that tense. These time words are important signals to help you choose the right tense.

Verbs express how events take place in time. Verb tenses give you two main kinds of information about an event (an action or state):

- the **time frame** in which the event takes place (present, past, future)
- the **relationship of the event to the time frame**: whether, for example, the event occurs at a point (or points) in time or extends for a period of time. This relationship is called **aspect**.