Articles for English Language Learners: Count and Uncount

The three English articles are a, an, and the.

WHEN TO USE THE, A, AND AN

THE

- “The” is used to mean a specific noun.
  - For example: “The house” means one specific house.

A/AN

- “A” or “an” is used to mean any of a certain noun.
  - For example: “A house” means any house.
- “An” is used instead of “a” when the following noun (or adjective) begins with a vowel sound.
  - For example: An owl, an hour, an excellent paper.

COUNT VERSUS UNCOUNT

The most important way to determine which article you use is by determining if the noun you are using the article with is count or uncount (also known as non-count).

UNCOUNT NOUNS: words such as peace, music, water, air, and luck.

- You cannot use a/an with uncount nouns.
- You cannot make an uncount noun plural or put a number in front of it.
- Uncount nouns are used with no article if referring to the thing in general.
  - For example: Water is hydrating. I love music. Peace is ideal. I wish you luck.
- Uncount nouns are used with “the” if talking about a particular example of the thing.
  - For example: The water is so cold. I love the music they play at church. The peace that followed was incredible. The luck of that family is amazing.

COUNT NOUNS: words such as computer, pencil, garden, children, and question.

- You can put a number in front of a count noun, make a count noun plural, and use a/an or the before a count noun.
- You must use an article before a singular count noun.
  - For example: The computer is fast. I found a pencil. Mike asked a question. The children were in the garden.
- Use a plural count noun to mean all or any of that thing.
  - For example: Computers are important tools. Marie collects pencils. The couple did not have children.

*Some nouns can be both count and uncount, depending on the context and meaning.*