

ARTICLES AND NOUN PHRASES

A noun is a word used to name a person or a thing (a place, an idea, or an action). A noun phrase is a phrase in which the main word is a noun.

When you describe things in English, you sometimes place the articles *a* (or *an*) and *the* before the nouns:

I have to write **a** research essay.

The essay I'm working on is about international business.

Other times, you describe things without using articles:

I don't enjoy writing **essays**. (plural noun with no article)

Time management is my biggest problem. (uncountable noun with no article)

To understand the rules for using articles correctly in noun phrases, you need to know first, whether the noun is countable or uncountable, and second, whether the noun phrase is general or specific.

Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Countable nouns have a plural form. Uncountable nouns have no plural form. Some nouns can be either countable or uncountable, depending on the context.

Countable nouns:

a research essay, the essay, essays

Uncountable nouns:

international business, time management

Noun that can be countable and uncountable:

We've run out of **paper**. (uncountable: material for a printer)

I'm preparing **a paper** for Business 101. (countable: an essay)

TASK 1

Indicate whether the nouns in bold in the following sentences are countable or uncountable.

		Countable	Uncountable
1	I need to do research for the essay.		✓
2	The research has to be from reliable academic sources.		✓
3	I have 10 days to finish the assignment .	✓	
4	I usually hand in assignments on time.	✓	

General and Specific Noun Phrases

General noun phrases refer to all members of a group or category. Specific noun phrases refer to a specific thing or things. The following noun phrases illustrate the difference between the two:

1. I don't enjoy writing **essays**. (general noun phrase)
2. **The essay I'm working on** is about international business. (specific noun phrase)

In sentence 1, *essays* is a general noun phrase because it means all essays, or all types of essays. It refers to all members of the group, or category, of "essay." In sentence 2, *the essay I'm working on* is a specific noun phrase because it refers to a particular essay—the one the speaker is working on.

TASK 2

Indicate whether the noun phrases in bold in the following sentences are general or specific.

		General	Specific
1	There's a Student Support Office on campus.		✓
2	The Office is in the library.		✓
3	The computers in the library have just been updated.		✓
4	Laptop computers have made studying easier.	✓	
5	Having a smart phone is also helpful.	✓	
6	The smart phone I bought last week takes fantastic photos.		✓

General Noun Phrases

There are four different ways to form general noun phrases. The rules for article use depend on whether the noun is countable or uncountable, and singular or plural.

1. Singular countable noun: use *a/an*.

I need to buy **a smart phone** for the e-learning course.

The noun phrase *a smart phone* is general because it refers to any smart phone.

2. Plural countable noun: use no article.

Smart phones have many benefits for students.

The noun phrase *smart phones* is general because it refers to all smart phones.

3. Uncountable noun: use no article.

Mobile technology is helpful for doing research.

The noun phrase *mobile technology* is general because it refers to all forms of mobile technology.

Explain to students that the article *the* is normally used for specific noun phrases, except in type 4 contexts.

4. Species, inventions, and academic analysis: use *the* + singular countable noun.
 - a) In my project, I researched the diet of **the polar bear**. (species)
 - b) **The GPS tracker** can help researchers track animals' movements. (invention)
 - c) The essay is about the role of **the manager** in international charities. (academic analysis)

In examples a, b, and c, *the* [singular noun] refers in general to all polar bears, GPS trackers, and managers. The sentences could also be written with no article and a plural countable noun and have exactly the same meaning:

In my project, I researched the diet of **polar bears**.

GPS trackers can help researchers track animals' movements.

The essay is about the role of **managers** in international charities.

The only difference relates to style. Using *the* [singular noun] as in examples a to c above gives the sentences a more academic tone.

Specific Noun Phrases

There are four different ways to form specific noun phrases. Again, the rules for article use depend on whether the noun is countable or uncountable.

1. Singular countable noun: use *the*.

The phone I bought last week is already broken.

The noun phrase *the phone I bought last week* is specific because it refers to a specific phone—the one I bought last week.

2. Plural countable noun: use *the*.

The computers in the library have been upgraded.

The noun phrase *the computers in the library* is specific because it refers to specific computers—the ones in the library.

3. Uncountable noun: use *the*.

The food at the campus restaurant is cheap.

The noun phrase *the food at the campus restaurant* is specific because it refers to specific food—the food at the campus restaurant.

4. First mention of a specific thing: use *a/an* + singular countable noun, then *the* + noun when you refer again to the same thing.

a) I bought **a phone** yesterday.

b) **The phone** cost \$450.

In example a, the noun phrase *a phone* is specific because it refers to a specific phone that the speaker is mentioning for the first time. The next time it is mentioned, and every time after that, the speaker will refer to it as *the phone*, as in example b.

TASK 3

Indicate whether the nouns in the following sentences are countable or uncountable and whether the noun phrases are general or specific.

- The polar bear** is under threat in many areas of the Arctic.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- Polar bears** and their habitats have been badly affected by climate change.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- Last year, the government set up **a new agency** to protect Arctic species.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- The agency** is also studying climate change in the Arctic.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- Melting ice** is causing many problems for polar bears.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- The Arctic sea ice off Alaska and the Yukon** has been melting rapidly.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- The polar bears living in these areas** may struggle to find food.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific
- If I visit Alaska, I'll need to buy **a warm winter coat**.
 Countable Uncountable General Specific

TASK 4

In the following paragraphs, the noun phrases in bold are incorrect. Write the correct form above each incorrect phrase and label the correction (g) for general or (s) for specific.

Students (g)
The students often struggle with academic writing. *Academic writing in English (g)*
The academic writing in English is especially difficult for students whose first language is not English. Such
a preparatory course (s)
students at South Coast University are required to take **the preparatory course**
The course (s) during their first term. **A course** is called Academic Writing 100. *The students (s)*
Students who are currently taking *the course (s)* **course** are mostly international students.



a student (s) a C grade (s) the student (s) an advanced
If **student** passes the course with **C grade**, **student** can register for **advanced**
writing course (g) the course (s)
writing course. Students who don't pass can retake **course** once.

TASK 5

Write five sentences containing general or specific noun phrases. In each sentence, use at least two of the countable and uncountable nouns below.

Countable Nouns

- article
- assignment
- error
- essay
- international student
- journal article
- noun phrase
- online dictionary
- strategy

Uncountable Nouns

- academic communication
- academic writing
- accuracy
- analysis
- determination
- grammar
- reading
- research
- vocabulary

Sample answers

1. **English grammar** can be difficult, especially the rules for **articles**.

2. Can you recommend **an online dictionary** that I can use when I write **essays**?

3. A quarter of the grade for **the assignment** is for **grammar** and **accuracy**.

4. **The journal article** I read last night contained a lot of **technical vocabulary**.

5. I'm researching **the strategies international students** use when they do **academic writing**.

SUMMARY

ARTICLES AND NOUN PHRASES

Type of Noun Phrase	Examples	Form	Concept
General	I need to buy a smart phone for the e-learning course.	<i>a/an</i> + singular countable noun	<i>A smart phone</i> refers to any smart phone.
	Smart phones have many benefits for students.	No article + plural countable noun	<i>Smart phones</i> refers to all smart phones.
	Mobile technology is helpful for doing research.	No article + uncountable noun	<i>Mobile technology</i> refers to all forms of mobile technology.
	a) In my project, I researched the diet of the polar bear . b) The GPS tracker can help researchers track animals' movements. c) The essay is about the role of the manager in international charities.	<i>the</i> + singular countable noun	a) Refers to the species b) Refers to the invention c) Context of academic analysis
Specific	The phone I bought last week is already broken.	<i>the</i> + singular countable noun	<i>The phone . . .</i> refers to a specific phone: the one I bought last week.
	The computers in the library have been upgraded.	<i>the</i> + plural countable noun	<i>The computers . . .</i> refers to specific computers: the ones in the library.
	The food at the campus restaurant is cheap.	<i>the</i> + uncountable noun	<i>The food . . .</i> refers to specific food: the food at the campus restaurant.
	I bought a phone yesterday. The phone cost \$450.	<i>a/an</i> + singular countable noun	<i>A phone</i> is the first mention of a specific phone. <i>The phone</i> is used in the second mention and any others that follow.

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE TENSES

Action verbs describe physical or mental actions (doing things). State verbs express states (senses, states of being, thoughts, emotions).

The purpose of tenses is to locate actions or states in the past, present, and future. The following are examples of verbs in past, present, and future time: the verbs are in bold and the time ideas, underlined.

- In 1886, Karl Benz **produced** the first modern automobile. (past time)
Today, over one billion people **drive** cars. (present time)
 The number of electric cars **will rise** by 50% by 2030. (future time)

Past Time

Past Simple Tense

1. Karl Benz **designed** the first modern automobile in 1885.
2. Benz's car **had** three wheels and an internal combustion engine.

Use the past simple tense to describe past actions in sentences with an idea of finished time. In sentence 1, the time idea is finished and stated (*in 1885*). The time idea is also finished in sentence 2, but it is not stated. Instead, the reader understands it is the same finished time as in the previous sentence.

State verbs are not normally used in continuous forms.

Past Continuous Tense

I **was visiting** Germany when I first rode in an electric car.

The past continuous is used to describe an action (*visiting*) that was in progress at a specific time in the past (*when I first rode in an electric car*).

Normally, simple tenses have no auxiliary verbs. However, the term *present perfect simple* is used here to differentiate this form from the present perfect continuous.

Present Perfect Simple Tense

1. I **have lived** in Amsterdam since I was a child.
2. I **'ve visited** Hungary twice.
3. I **'ve finished** my homework!

The time idea in sentence 1 is unfinished past (*since I was a child* refers to a period that started in the past and continues to the present); therefore, the speaker still lives in Amsterdam.

In sentence 2, the present perfect is used to refer to life experience. The time idea is undefined past time. In other words, it is not known or not important when the visits took place; the emphasis is on the experience.

In sentence 3, the present perfect is used to refer to one recent action, again at an undefined past time. The emphasis is on the present result ("now I can relax"), not on when the action happened.

Present Perfect Continuous Tense

1. I've been living in Amsterdam for six months.
2. I've been cycling non-stop for the last hour.

The time idea in sentence 1 is unfinished past: the speaker still lives in Amsterdam. This use of the present perfect continuous can seem more temporary than the present perfect (*I've lived*).

In sentence 2, the present perfect continuous describes a continuous, ongoing action. The emphasis is on the present result ("now I'm tired").

Past Perfect Simple Tense

When I moved to Amsterdam, my parents **had been** there for a month.

The past perfect is used to describe one past action or state (the parents had [already] been in Amsterdam for a month) that occurred before another (the speaker moved to Amsterdam).

Past Perfect Continuous Tense

I'd been running for 20 minutes when it started to snow.

The past perfect continuous conveys the idea of a continuous action that was ongoing (*running*) at the time of a past event (*when it started to snow*).

Used To for Past Habit

1. I used to walk to school every day.
2. I used to belong to a running club.

Used to describes actions that are past habits. The idea in sentence 1 is that the speaker does not walk to school any more.

Used to is also used with state verbs that describe past habits. The idea in sentence 2 is that the speaker does not belong to the club any more.

Would for Past Habit

- ✓ 1. I would walk to school every day.
- ✗ 2. I would belong to a running club.

Would is also used to describe actions that are past habits. The idea in sentence 1 is that the speaker does not walk to school any more. Sentence 2 is ungrammatical, however: *would* cannot be used with a state verb to describe a past habit.

TASK 1

Identify the incorrect sentence in each of the following pairs and explain why it is incorrect.

1. a) Yesterday, I came to college by bus. Correct Incorrect
b) Yesterday, I've come to college by bus. Correct Incorrect

Explanation: Yesterday expresses an idea of finished time and requires the past simple, not the present perfect.

2. a) I was studying when the phone rang. Correct Incorrect
 b) I was studying when the phone rung. Correct Incorrect

Explanation: The correct past simple form of ring is rang; rung is the past participle.
For example, the past participle rung is used in the present perfect: the phone has rung
10 times.

3. a) I've read three book chapters today. Correct Incorrect
 b) I've read three book chapters yesterday. Correct Incorrect

Explanation: The present perfect is used to express unfinished time (today), but not
finished time (yesterday).

4. a) I'd now been working here for six months. Correct Incorrect
 b) I've now been working here for six months. Correct Incorrect

Explanation: The present perfect continuous (sentence b) can be used for unfinished
time (for six months), which includes the idea of "now." The past perfect continuous
(sentence a) is used for finished time; it cannot be linked to now.

5. a) When I was younger, I would go hiking Correct Incorrect
 on weekends.
 b) When I was younger, I would like to go Correct Incorrect
 hiking on weekends.

Explanation: For past habits, would cannot be used with state verbs such as like.

Present Time

Present Simple Tense

1. I **drive** to work most days.
2. A proven cause of road accidents **is** speeding.
3. The city **has** an extensive public transit system.

In sentence 1, the present simple tense is used to describe a habit or a repeated action. Sentence 2 expresses factual information, and sentence 3, a state.

Present Continuous Tense

1. Sorry, I'm busy. I'm **meeting** a student at the moment.
2. I'm **cycling** to work this week. I want to get fit.
3. He's always **arriving** late to class.

In sentence 1, the present continuous describes an ongoing activity that is occurring at the time of speaking. In sentence 2, the activity is also ongoing; however, it is not clear whether it is occurring at the time of speaking.

The present perfect continuous is used in example 3 to describe a habit. In such sentences, the habit is often annoying.

Past Simple for Unreal Present

1. It's time we **left**. (We're at a party.)
2. If only I **had** more time. (I'm too busy.)

In sentence 1, the past simple form *left* refers to the idea of leaving. The idea is unreal in the present because the people are still at the party; however, they should leave soon.

In sentence 2, the past simple form *had* also refers to an unreal idea in the present. The idea is unreal because the speaker does not have enough time.

TASK 2

Complete each of the following sentences with a verb in the correct form to refer to present time. Follow the prompts in parentheses.

Sample answers

1. Beijing _____ **is** _____ the capital of China. (fact)
2. This week, I _____ **am/'m staying** _____ at a friend's house. (temporary continuous activity)
3. He _____ **is/'s always distracting me** _____ when he uses his phone. (annoying habit)
4. She _____ **is/'s talking** _____ to her boss. She'll call you back later. (temporary continuous activity, happening now)
5. If only I _____ **spoke / could speak** _____ Spanish. (unreal present)
6. I _____ **work** _____ at the campus bookstore every Sunday afternoon. (habit)

Future Time

Future with Will

1. I think I **will pass** all my exams.
2. A: I forgot my library card.
B: It's OK. I'll **lend** you mine.

Will is used in the first example to make a general prediction, and in the second example, to make an offer. The offer to lend the library card is spontaneous, which means the decision was not planned, but made at the time of speaking.

Future with Going To

1. He looks really exhausted. He's **going to faint!**
2. I'm **going to move** closer to campus next year.

Going to is used in example 1 to make a prediction based on present evidence. The evidence is that he looks really exhausted. Because of this evidence, the speaker uses *going to* instead of *will* to make the prediction.

In example 2, *going to* is used to describe a future plan or intention. The decision to move closer to campus is not spontaneous (made at the time of speaking); it was made in the past.

Present Continuous for Future

I'm **meeting** the team coach tomorrow morning.

The present continuous can be used to describe an arranged future activity, usually one that involves other people.

Present Simple for Future

The train **leaves** in 20 minutes.

The present simple tense is used in the example above because the departure of the train is scheduled. This form is called *timetable future*.

Future Continuous Tense

This time tomorrow, I'll **be writing** my final exam.

The future continuous is used to describe a temporary continuous action (*writing my final exam*) that will happen at a specific future time (*this time tomorrow*).

Future Perfect Tense

This time next week, I'll **have completed** all my courses.

The future perfect is used to describe a future action (*complete all my courses*) that will have finished by a specific time (*this time next week*).

TASK 3

Explain the difference between the sentences in each of the following pairs.

- a) I think it will rain tomorrow.
b) It's going to rain tomorrow.

Both are predictions, but sentence b is based on present evidence; for example, the speaker may have just seen the weather forecast.

- a) I'm going to start walking to work next week.
b) I'll walk with you. It will be good exercise.

Sentence a is a future plan or intention, and the speaker made the decision in the past.

Sentence b is an offer; the decision is spontaneous, made at the time of speaking.

3. a) I'm taking the 11:30 train tomorrow morning.
b) The train leaves at 11:30 tomorrow morning.

Sentence a describes an arranged future activity, while b describes the scheduled departure of the train.

4. a) This time next week, I'll be writing my last exam.
b) This time next week, I'll have finished my last exam.

Both sentences refer to a specific future time. Sentence a describes an activity that will be ongoing at that time, while b refers to an activity that will have already finished at that time.

Point out that in everyday language, there is little difference between the two forms.

5. a) I'm taking a flight on Friday at 3 p.m.
b) I'm going to take a flight on Friday.

Sentence a refers to an arranged future activity (the ticket has been bought, and the plan is unlikely to change). Sentence b refers to a future intention that was decided in the past, but it is not clear whether any travel arrangements have been made.

6. a) I'll check your presentation if you need help.
b) I'm meeting him tomorrow to help him with his presentation.

Sentence a is a spontaneous offer: the decision to help was made at the time of speaking. Sentence b refers to an arranged future activity: the speaker has already made plans to meet him tomorrow, for example, by arranging a time and a place.



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TASK 4

Using the verb forms and tenses you have studied in this unit, write three sentences each about your past, present, and future. Follow the prompts in parentheses.

My Past

1. (studying English) _____

2. (different countries visited) _____

3. (first day at college or university) _____

My Present

- (where I live) _____

- (length of time living here) _____

- (temporary ongoing activity this week) _____

My Future

- (after graduating) _____

- (future job) _____

- (this time next year) _____

SUMMARY

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE TENSES

Tense/Form	Examples	Concept
Past Time		
Past simple	a) Karl Benz designed the first modern automobile in 1885. b) Benz's car had three wheels and an internal combustion engine.	a) Finished time, time idea stated b) Finished time, time idea understood
Past continuous	I was visiting Germany when I first rode in an electric car.	An action in progress at a specific past time
Present perfect simple	a) I have lived in Amsterdam since I was a child. b) I 've visited Hungary twice. c) I 've finished my homework!	a) Unfinished past (I still live here.) b) Life experience c) One recent action with emphasis on the present result (I'm free now.)
Present perfect continuous	a) I 've been living in Amsterdam for six months. b) I 've been cycling non-stop for the last hour.	a) Unfinished past, may seem temporary (I still live here.) b) A continuous action with emphasis on the present result (I'm tired.)
Past perfect simple	When I moved to Amsterdam, my parents had been there for a month.	One past action or state occurred before another.
Past perfect continuous	I 'd been running for 20 minutes when it started to snow.	One continuous action was ongoing at the time of a past event.
<i>Used to</i> for past habit	a) I used to walk to school every day. b) I used to belong to a running club.	a) I don't do it any more. (action verb) b) I don't any more. (state verb)
<i>Would</i> for past habit	I would walk to school every day.	I don't do it any more. (action verbs only)

Tense/Form	Examples	Concept
Present Time		
Present simple	a) I drive to work most days. b) A proven cause of road accidents is speeding. c) The city has an extensive public transit system.	a) A habit or a repeated action b) A fact c) A state
Present continuous	a) Sorry, I'm busy. I' m meeting a student at the moment. b) I' m cycling to work this week. c) He' s always arriving late to class.	a) An ongoing activity, happening now b) An ongoing activity, possibly happening now c) A habit (usually annoying)
Past simple for unreal present	a) It's time we left . (We're at a party.) b) If only I had more time. (I'm too busy.)	a) We are still at the party. b) I don't have more time.
Future Time		
Future with <i>will</i>	a) I think I will pass all my exams. b) A: I forgot my library card. B: It's OK. I' ll lend you mine.	a) A general prediction b) An offer based on a spontaneous decision made at the time of speaking
Future with <i>going to</i>	a) He looks really exhausted. He' s going to faint! b) I' m going to move closer to campus next year.	a) A prediction based on present evidence (He looks exhausted.) b) A future plan or intention, based on a decision made in the past
Present continuous for future	I' m meeting the team coach tomorrow morning.	Arranged future
Present simple for future	The train leaves in 20 minutes.	Timetable future
Future continuous	This time tomorrow, I' ll be writing my final exam.	A temporary continuous action that will happen at a specific future time
Future perfect	This time next week, I' ll have completed all my courses.	An action that will have finished by a specific future time