

Articles: Abstract and Concrete Generic

FORM: THE, A, AN, Ø

USE: Articles are sometimes used for specific references, but **THE, A, AN** and **Ø** can also be used to indicate a general or generic reference.

Abstract Generic References refer to entire classes such as humans, animals, body organs, plants and complex devices. They do NOT refer to simple inanimate objects, like “blanket” or “chair”. Use “**THE**” with singular count nouns and non-count nouns for this form. With abstract generic nouns for states, emotions and concepts (ex. love, war, freedom, peace) use no article. (Ø)

The koala only eats eucalyptus leaves.

The computer has drastically changed people’s lives.

The skin is the body’s largest organ.

Peace is the goal of many non-profit organizations. (no article)

Concrete Generic References refer to all of the representatives of a class individually, rather than to the whole class.

Use “**A/AN**” with singular count nouns.

Use “**Ø**” with plural nouns.

Use “**Ø**” with non-count nouns.

An earthquake usually lasts only a few seconds.

Lawyers often charge an hourly rate. (no article)

Water is the biggest component of the human body. (no article)

In each pair of sentences, choose the option that refers to a GENERAL (generic) reference rather than SPECIFIC reference.

1. a. A flu epidemic can be dangerous for elderly people and young children.
b. A flu epidemic affected the city this winter.
2. a. A teacher should treat all students fairly and with respect.
b. A teacher introduced me to Shakespeare in high school.
3. a. The water in the Pacific Ocean is very salty.
b. Water is one of the most valuable resources.
4. a. The cat is a nocturnal animal.
b. The cat ate the chicken that was on the table.
5. a. Dolphins communicate with one another using high-pitched sounds.
b. Dolphins were swimming in the sea near our hotel.

Choose one noun from each group that can be used as an ABSTRACT GENERIC NOUN with THE. Write a generic sentence with this noun.

Example: table / silk / computer

The computer is part of everyday life for many people. (table and silk are simple inanimate objects so are not used generically with “the”)

1. brain / desk / bed

2. violin / shoelace / peace

3. small cat / tiger / bedroom door

4. button on the shirt / maple tree / fence

5. optometrist / sofa / pets

In which sentences can A/AN be replaced with THE? Check (✓) these sentences and explain why.

Example: A Canada Goose flies south in the winter to avoid the cold. ✓

“Canada Goose” is a class of animal, so it’s possible to use “the”.

1. A microwave oven has made it possible to prepare a variety of foods quickly and conveniently.
2. A headache can be caused by certain foods like chocolate, cheese or nuts.
3. A digital camera makes it possible to send photographs easily over the Internet.
4. A computer is needed by graphic designers.
5. An ostrich is a very large African bird.
6. A reliable employee is very valuable.
7. A good dictionary is important for every language student.
8. A handmade sweater is usually very expensive to buy.
9. A guitar can be used for classical, jazz, blues or rock music.
10. A blizzard makes it dangerous for people to travel.