
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Definite articles with abstract uncountable nouns



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Callum

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar, I'm Callum.

Catherine

And I'm Catherine, hello.

Callum

In this programme we're talking about the definite article with abstract uncountable nouns.

Catherine

Yes, we'll explain what that all means.

Callum

And we'll end up with a quiz to see if we've done a good job.

Catherine

No pressure then!

Callum

Indeed. To start with, let's just remind everyone about the terms we're using. First, there's the definite article. What's that, Catherine?

Catherine

The.

Callum

The what?

Catherine

Just **the**.

Callum

Just the what?

Catherine

You're doing this on purpose, aren't you Callum? The definite article is the word **the**. Articles are used before nouns.

Callum

Today's topic is using **the** with abstract uncountable nouns. Tell us about those.

Catherine

OK. Now, before I get to the abstract part, let's just remind everybody about uncountable nouns, which you might also hear described as mass nouns. These are nouns that, as the name suggests, you can't count. They have no plural form. Words like air, water, cheese, money...

Callum

Wait a minute...

Catherine

Yes?

Callum

Did you say money?

Catherine

Yes.

Callum

Did you say you can't count money?

Catherine

That's right. You can't count money, at least not grammatically. You can't count money in the same way as you can count, for example, chairs. Because, when you count chairs, you can just give a number. How many chairs are there? Three, ten, 2,150. But if I ask you Callum how much money you have in your pocket, what would you say?

Callum

OK, well, let me see. I've got five, ten... I've got £15. So I can count money, surely?

Catherine

Yes, you've got **15 pounds**. But you haven't got **15 moneys**. So, pounds are countable, money isn't. We are counting the pounds.

Callum

I see, and what are abstract uncountable nouns then?

Catherine

Well, before we go to abstract, let's first talk about the concrete ones. Concrete uncountable nouns are things that you can physically experience, that's things that you can touch, see, hear, smell or taste. But abstract nouns don't refer to these physical things. Abstract nouns refer to ideas, feelings, emotions, qualities and concepts. So, things like: **love, fun, happiness, bravery, patience, enthusiasm and childhood.**

Callum

But I'm sure I experienced **childhood**. It seemed pretty real to me.

Catherine

Well, because we describe something as abstract, it doesn't mean it isn't real. You certainly were a child Callum at some time, whenever that was. But the period of time when you were a child... all the experiences that you had when you were growing up... aren't physical things. Together they make an idea or a concept that we call **childhood**.

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6 Minute Grammar from BBC Learning English

Callum

Today we're looking at using the definite article with abstract uncountable nouns. We've defined our terms, so now let's look at how these two go together. Catherine, can we use **the** with abstract uncountable nouns?

Catherine

Well, Callum, it depends on the context. If we are talking about something in general, we don't use the definite article. Here's Finn, with an example.

Finn

It can be difficult to find **happiness**.

Catherine

The abstract noun there is **happiness**. Here we're talking about **happiness** in general, we don't use the definite article. Now compare that use of **happiness**, with this one.

Finn

I can't express **the happiness** that I felt when my son was born.

Catherine

Now in this case, are we talking about **happiness** in general?

Callum

No, we're talking about a specific time, a particular moment when there was **happiness**.

Catherine

Right, so in this case, because it is referring to a particular time we do need to use **the definite article**. Note that after the noun **the happiness** there is a phrase that points to the exact time being described. And in this case the phrase is:

Callum

That I felt when my son was born.

Catherine

Exactly. And that phrase is a defining relative clause. When there is a defining relative clause following an abstract uncountable noun, the chances are the noun will have the definite article in front of it.

Callum

So we know that the definite article **the** is used with abstract uncountable nouns when we are talking about a specific example of that noun.

Catherine

And when we are talking about that noun in general, we don't use any article.

Callum

I think it's time for a little quiz. Listen to each sentence and decide if the use of the article is correct or not. Finn, number one please.

Finn

I've got a lot of the ambition.

Catherine

And that one is... not correct. **Ambition** is the noun but it shouldn't have the definite article. Next one please, Finn.

Finn

He had the confidence that is needed to sing in public.

Callum

That is correct. The noun is **confidence** and as the particular example of confidence is defined, we do need **the**. Last question, please.

Finn

Love is all you need.

Catherine

Of course, that one is correct. **Love** is the noun and it refers to the idea of love in general so no definite article. Well done if you got all those right.

Callum

That's all from us today, there's more about this topic on our website bbclearningenglish.com. Do join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

All

Bye.