

ARTICLES

Here are (some of) the rules for when to use "A, An or The":

a = indefinite article (not a specific object, one of a number of the same objects) with consonants

She has a dog.

I work in a factory.

an = indefinite article (not a specific object, one of a number of the same objects) with vowels (a,e,i,o,u)

Can I have an apple?

She is an English teacher.

the = definite article (a specific object that both the person speaking and the listener know)

The car over there is fast.

The teacher is very good, isn't he?

The first time you speak of something use "*a*" or "*an*", the next time you repeat that object use "*the*".

I live in a house. The house is quite old and has four bedrooms.

I ate in a Chinese restaurant. The restaurant was very good.

DO NOT use an article with countries, states, counties or provinces, lakes and mountains except when the country is a collection of states such as "The United States".

He lives in Washington near Mount Rainier.

They live in northern British Columbia.

Use an article with bodies of water, oceans and seas –

My country borders on the Pacific Ocean

DO NOT use an article when you are speaking about things in general

I like Russian tea.

She likes reading books.

DO NOT use an article when you are speaking in a general way about meals, places, and transport:

He has breakfast at home.

I go to university.

He comes to work by taxi.

1. Indefinite Articles: *a* and *an*

A and *an* signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to any member of a group. These indefinite articles are used with singular nouns when the noun is general; the corresponding indefinite quantity word *some* is used for plural general nouns. The rule is:

a + singular noun beginning with a consonant: a boy

an + singular noun beginning with a vowel: an elephant

a + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: a user (sounds like 'yoo-zer,' i.e. begins with a consonant 'y' sound, so 'a' is used)

some + plural noun: some girls

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between a and an depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

a broken egg

an unusual problem

a European country (sounds like 'yur-o-pi-an,' i.e. begins with consonant 'y' sound)

Note also that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a profession, nation, or religion.

I am a teacher.

Brian is an Irishman.

Seiko is a practicing Buddhist.

2. Definite Article: the

When using the English language, *the* can be thought of as similar to a little computer cursor. Where the cursor is resting, one's attention also rests.

The chair ...

It is customary to focus on the word following the word *the* with the questions 'who', 'where', 'when', 'why', 'how', and then wait for the rest of the sentence, which should complete the meaning.

The chair is ...

Now it gets interesting – *is* implies NOW, so the listener should pay attention for a current event!

The chair is broken.

The sentence is completed; the listener sits on that specific chair at his own peril.

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is particular or specific. *The* signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. Compare the indefinite and definite articles in the following examples:

Indefinite (a or an)

Definite (the)

Singular

a dog (any dog)

the dog (that specific dog)

an apple (any apple)

the apple (that specific apple)

Plural

some dogs (any dogs)

the dogs (those specific dogs)

some apples (any apples)

the apples (those specific apples)

The is **not** used with non-countable nouns referring to something in a general sense:

[no article] Coffee is a popular drink.

[no article] Japanese was his native language.

[no article] Intelligence is difficult to quantify.

The is used with non-countable nouns that are made more specific by a limiting modifying phrase or clause:

The coffee in my cup is too hot to drink.

The Japanese he speaks is often heard in the countryside.

The intelligence of animals is variable but undeniable.

The is also used when a noun refers to something unique:

the White House

the theory of relativity

the 1999 federal budget

Note: Geographical uses of *the*

Do not use *the* before:

- names of countries (Italy, Mexico, Bolivia) **except** the Netherlands and the US
- names of cities, towns, or states (Seoul, Manitoba, Miami)
- names of streets (Washington Blvd., Main St.)
- names of lakes and bays (Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie) **except** with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes
- names of mountains (Mount Everest, Mount Fuji) **except** with ranges of mountains like the Andes **or** the Rockies **or** unusual names like the Matterhorn
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West) **except** with island chains like the Aleutians, the Hebrides, **or** the Canary Islands

Do use *the* before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas (the Nile, the Danube, the Pacific)
- points on the globe (the Equator, the North Pole)
- geographical areas (the Middle East, the West)
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula, the Balkans)

Further Uses of Articles

In addition, use of *a*, *an*, and *the* also depends on whether the noun following the article possesses one of these paired qualities:

1. Countable vs. Non countable

A and *an* are used if the noun can be counted.

I stepped in a puddle. (How many puddles did you step in? Just one.

Therefore, use *a*.)

I drank a glass of milk. (Glasses of milk can be counted)

I saw an apple tree. (Apple trees can be counted)

The must be used when the noun cannot be counted and you are not referring to the noun in a general sense.

I dived into the water. (How many waters did you dive into? The question doesn't make any sense because water is non-countable. Therefore, use *the*.)

I saw the milk spill. (How many milks? Milk cannot be counted)

I admired the foliage. (How many foliages? Foliage cannot be counted)

2. First vs. Subsequent Mention

A or *an* is used to introduce a noun when it is mentioned for the first time in a piece of writing. *The* is used afterwards each time you mention that same noun.

An awards ceremony at the Kremlin would not normally have attracted so much attention. But when it was leaked that Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko would be presenting medals to three cosmonauts, interest in the ceremony intensified. Time, Sept. 17, 1984.

Note: *There is* and *there are* can be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or essay.

There is a robin in the tree outside my window. When my cat jumps up on the desk, the robin flies away.

3. General vs. Specific

A, *an*, and *the* can all be used to indicate that a noun refers to the whole class to which individual countable nouns belong. This use of articles is called generic, from the Latin word meaning "class."

A tiger is a dangerous animal. (any individual tiger)

The tiger is a dangerous animal. (all tigers: tiger as a generic category)

The difference between the indefinite *a* and *an* and the generic *a* and *an* is that the former means any one member of a class, while the latter means all of the members of a class.

The omission of articles also expresses a generic (or general) meaning:

- no article with a plural noun: Tigers are dangerous animals. (all tigers)
- no article with a non countable noun: Anger is a destructive emotion. (any kind of anger)

Omission of Articles

While some nouns combine with one article or the other based on whether they are countable or non countable, others simply never take either article. Some common types of nouns that do not take an article are:

1. Names of languages and nationalities

Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian

2. Names of sports

volleyball, hockey, baseball

3. Names of academic subjects

mathematics, biology, history, computer science

Exceptions: No Articles

Common non-countable (the noun cannot be counted) nouns are not preceded by an article.

Examples:

Pizza is Sara's favourite food. (all sorts of pizza, cannot be counted)

Creativity is essential for advertising. (all sorts of creativity, cannot be counted)

Common countable (noun can be counted) plural nouns are not preceded by an article.

Examples:

Errors are often known as mistakes. (all errors)

Tigers are fearful animals. (all tigers)

Non-countable Noun Creativity is essential for advertising. (All sorts of creativity)

Plural Countable Noun Tigers are fearful animals. (All tigers)

Common count nouns are used without articles in certain special situations:

Idiomatic expressions

We'll go by bus.

He must be in school.

With seasons

In spring, the flowers bloom.

With institutions

John is in college/church/jail/class/school.

With meals

Breakfast was at 9:00 am.

Cyndi made dinner for Jimmy.

With diseases

He has cancer.

I have pneumonia.

With time of day

They like to travel mostly by night.

We should get there around midnight.

Do not use *the* before:

Names of countries (England, Mexico, China)

Except: the Netherlands, the United States, the Republic of China

Names of cities, towns, or states (Victoria, Houston)

Names of streets (Red River, Navarro)

Names of individual lakes and bays (Lake Austin, Lake Erie) Except: groups of lakes like the Great Lakes

Names of individual mountains (Mount Everest, Mount Rushmore)

Except: ranges of mountains (the Andes or the Rockies)

Names of continents (North America, Asia)

Names of individual islands (Fiji, Maui)

Except: island chains (the Canary Islands)

Do not use any articles before.....

Names of languages (Chinese, English, Spanish)

Names of sports (basketball, softball, baseball)

Names of academic subjects (history, biology, mathematics)

A Few Exceptions:

Use *an* before unsounded h.

Examples: an honest mistake, an honourable award

Use *an* when discussing all vowels except u, and consonants f, h, l, m, n, r, s, and x.

Example: Mary's name begins with an M.

Use *a* when u makes the same sound as the y in you.

Examples: a unit, a unicorn, a U.S. citizen

Indefinite articles are also used to show membership in a profession, nation, or religion.

Lin is a doctor.

Fred is an American.

Juan is a Catholic.

Definite Article: *the*

The definite article *the* is used when referring to a particular member of a group. *The* is acceptable before both singular and plural nouns.

The rules are:

Specific nouns are preceded by *the*.

Examples:

The pizza I ate last night gave me an upset stomach. (specific pizza)

The errors in the article were minor. (specific errors)

Nouns that refer to something unique are preceded by *the*.

Examples:

the laws of gravity

the White House

the Department of Transportation

Note: When a noun refers to a particular class or group, or a specific member of a class or group, *the* can be used to modify both correctly.

Example 1:

Erik Erikson studied the development and growth of the human being. (In this case we are referring to the class of human beings.)

Example 2:

She is the only human being that I know who eats pickles with ice cream. (In this case we are referring to she, who is the only human being, rather than a class.)

CAUTION!!

Remember that even though you might know all the rules and principles behind the use of articles, there will be situations when selecting the right article or deciding whether or not even to use one will prove to be risky. How the reader approaches the text (situational or contextual) can also become a factor in the meaning and appropriate word choice or in this case, article choice. The key to becoming an expert when choosing and knowing the correct use of articles is to practice, practice, practice!!

Practice

1. Albert Einstein was __ famous scientist.
2. Einstein was born in __ Germany in 1879.
3. Einstein won __ Nobel Prize in Physics in 1921.
4. Einstein left his country and lived in __ States until he died in 1955.
5. Einstein is known for his theory of __ relativity.
6. Roentgen was __ German physicist who discovered __ X-rays, revolutionizing medical diagnosis.
7. Roentgen won __ 1901 Nobel Prize.
8. Mandela was born in __ South Africa.
9. Mandela was __ first President elected in __ South Africa after Apartheid was revoked.
10. Mandela was imprisoned for __ nearly 30 years for his anti-apartheid activities.
11. Mother Teresa was __ Roman Catholic nun.
12. Mother Teresa became famous for her hard work with __ poor.
13. She was __ founder of __ order of nuns called the Missionaries of Charity.
14. Mother Teresa lived in __ Calcutta, India.
15. Mother Teresa received __ Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.