

## Using Articles

What is an article? Basically, an article is an adjective. Like adjectives, articles modify nouns.

English has two articles: the and a/an. The is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; a/an is used to modify non-specific or non-particular nouns. We call the the *definite* article and a/an the *indefinite* article.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article

For example, if I say, "Let's read the book," I mean a *specific* book. If I say, "Let's read a book," I mean *any* book rather than a specific book.

Here's another way to explain it: The is used to refer to a *specific* or *particular* member of a group. For example, "I just saw the most popular movie of the year." There are many movies, but only one particular movie is the most popular. Therefore, we use the.

"A/an" is used to refer to a *non-specific* or *non-particular* member of the group. For example, "I would like to go see a movie." Here, we're not talking about a *specific* movie. We're talking about *any* movie. There are many movies, and I want to see *any* movie. I don't have a specific one in mind.

Let's look at each kind of article a little more closely.

### **Indefinite Articles: a and an**

"A" and "an" signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. For example:

- "My daughter really wants a dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog. We don't know which dog because we haven't found the dog yet.
- "Somebody call a policeman!" This refers to *any* policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.
- "When I was at the zoo, I saw an elephant!" Here, we're talking about a single, non-specific thing, in this case an elephant. There are probably several elephants at the zoo, but there's only *one* we're talking about here.

**Remember, using a or an depends on the sound that begins the next word. So...**

- a + singular noun beginning with a consonant: *a boy; a car; a bike; a zoo; a dog*
- an + singular noun beginning with a vowel: *an elephant; an egg; an apple; an idiot; an orphan*
- 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); *a university; a unicycle*
- an + nouns starting with silent "h": *an hour*
- a + nouns starting with a pronounced "h": *a horse*
  - In some cases where "h" is pronounced, such as "historical," you can use an. However, a is more commonly used and preferred.

A historical event is worth recording.

Remember that these rules also apply when you use acronyms:

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 'yer-o-pi-an,' i.e. begins with consonant 'y' sound)

Remember, too, that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a group:

- I am a teacher. (I am a member of a large group known as teachers.)
- Brian is an Irishman. (Brian is a member of the people known as Irish.)
- Seiko is a practicing Buddhist. (Seiko is a member of the group of people known as Buddhists.)

### **Definite Article: the**

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. The signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. For example:

"The dog that bit me ran away." Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.

"I was happy to see the policeman who saved my cat!" Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.

"I saw the elephant at the zoo." Here, we're talking about a *specific* noun. Probably there is only one elephant at the zoo.

## **Count and Noncount Nouns**

The can be used with noncount nouns, or the article can be omitted entirely.

- "I love to sail over the water" (some specific body of water) or "I love to sail over water" (any water).
- "He spilled the milk all over the floor" (some specific milk, perhaps the milk you bought earlier that day) or "He spilled milk all over the floor" (any milk).

"A/an" can be used only with count nouns.

- "I need a bottle of water."
- "I need a new glass of milk."

Most of the time, you can't say, "She wants a water," unless you're implying, say, a bottle of water.

## **Geographical use of the**

There are some specific rules for using the with geographical nouns.

Do not use the before:

- names of most countries/territories: *Italy, Mexico, Bolivia*; however, *the Netherlands, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, the United States*
- 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 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*

## Omission of Articles

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities: *Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian* (unless you are referring to the population of the nation: "**The** Spanish are known for their warm hospitality.")
- Names of sports: *volleyball, hockey, baseball*
- Names of academic subjects: *mathematics, biology, history, computer science*

## Articles: A versus An

### How do you know when to use the indefinite articles?

The choice of article is based upon the phonetic (sound) quality of the first letter in a word, not on the orthographic (written) representation of the letter. If the first letter makes a vowel-type sound, you use "an"; if the first letter would make a consonant-type sound, you use "a." However, even if you follow these basic rules when deciding to use "a" or "an," remember that there are some exceptions to these rules.

"A" goes before words that begin with consonants.

- a cat
- a dog
- a purple onion
- a buffalo
- a big apple

"An" goes before words that begin with vowels:

- an apricot
- an egg
- an Indian
- an orbit
- an uprising

## **Exceptions**

Use "an" before a silent or unsounded "h." Because the "h" does not have any phonetic representation or audible sound, the sound that follows the article is a vowel; consequently, "an" is used.

- an honorable peace
- an honest error

When "u" makes the same sound as the "y" in "you," or "o" makes the same sound as "w" in "won," then a is used. The word-initial "y" sound ("unicorn") is a glide [j] phonetically, which has consonantal properties; consequently, it is treated as a consonant, requiring "a."

- a union
- a united front
- a unicorn
- a used napkin
- a U.S. ship
- a one-legged man

## Rules of Using Articles with Examples

Definite article or Indefinite article, each of the articles has different uses in different situations.

### Using Indefinite Article: *a* & *an*

#### **Rule 1:**

A common noun in the **singular** number always requires an article before it. But a plural common noun does not require an article always. A plural common noun can have the article 'the' if we want to particularize that noun.

#### **Example:**

- I saw a snake. (Refers to a random snake)
- I saw snakes in a zoo. (No article is required)
- I have seen the snake again. (Refers to the snake I have already seen earlier)
- I have seen the snakes again before leaving the zoo. (Refers to the particular snakes of the zoo which I saw earlier.)

#### **Rule 2:**

The choice between the two indefinite articles – *a* & *an* – is determined by sound. Words beginning with consonant sounds precede '*a*' and words beginning with vowel sounds precede '*an*'. There are some special cases also. For instance,

- a university, a union, a useful book, etc.
- a one-dollar note, a one-man army, etc.
- an MA, a BA, a LLB, a BSC, etc.

#### **Rule 3:**

*A or an* - sometimes makes a Proper Noun a Common Noun. Proper nouns generally do not take any articles, but when a proper noun needs to be used as a common noun, you must bring *a or an* - for it.

**Example:**

- He thinks he is a Shakespeare. (Here, 'Shakespeare' does not refer to the actual person but someone like him.)
- He seems to be an Australian. ('Australia' is a proper noun but 'Australian' is a common noun because there is only one Australia but a million of Australians.)

**Rule 4:**

Sometimes indefinite articles are used to refer the number 'one'/'each'/'per'.

**Example:**

- I earned a thousand dollar in that job. (One thousand dollar)
- I have a car. (One car)
- It goes 50 miles an hour. (Per Hour)

**Rule 5:**

Indefinite articles often precede descriptive adjectives.

**Example:**

- He is a good boy.
- What a nice car!

**Rule 6:**

'A' sometimes comes before determiners, for example, *a few, a little, a lot of, a most, etc.* but in the case of *many, a or an* - comes after.

**Example:**

- I have a few friends coming over.
- There is a little milk in the jar.
- Many a fan welcomed

## Using Definite Article: *the*

### **Rule 1:**

'*The*' is used to indicate a particular person(s) or thing(s) in the case of common nouns. Proper nouns generally do not take an article.

### **Example:**

- The man is running. (A particular man)
- I saw the boy stealing.
- Where is the pen I gave you last year?
- I gave him a ball, but he lost the ball. ('a ball' became 'the ball' in the second clause because that ball was not a random ball anymore.)

### **Rule 2:**

Sometimes '*the*' is used to generalize a group/whole class.

### **Example:**

- The dog is a faithful animal. (Refers to the whole species of dog.)
- The English are industrious. (Refers to the people of England as a nation)
- The honest are respected. (The+adjectives = plural noun)
- The poor are not always dishonest. (The+adjectives = plural noun)

### **Rule 3:**

To particularize a non-count noun 'the' is required before it.

### **Example:**

- The water of the Arctic Ocean is freezing.
- Please return the money I lent you last year.



#### **Rule 4:**

'The' is mandatory before a thing which is only one of a kind in the universe.

#### **Example:**

- The moon is shining tonight.
- The earth is moving around the sun.

#### **Use of '*the*' before geographical places :**

#### **Rule 5:**

Using '*the*' with geographical nouns generally depends on the size and plurality of the things those nouns refer to. '*The*' is generally used everywhere except some cases. So, it's better to know those exceptions first.

#### **'The' must not precede:**

- Names of continents: *Asia, Europe, Australia, Africa, South America, North America, Antarctica.*
- Names of countries: *Australia, Bolivia, England, France, Spain, etc.*
- Names of states, cities, or towns: *Los Angeles, Alaska, Sydney, London,*
- Names of streets: *George street, Albion Street, New town street,*
- Names of **singular** lakes and bays: *Lake Carey, Lake Eyre, Lake Hillier, Shark Bay,*
- Names of **single** mountains: *Mount Everest, Mount Solitary, Mount Bindo, Mount Fuji, etc.*
- Names of **single** islands: *Easter Island, Bare Island, Bird Island, Fatima Island,*
- Names of languages: *Spanish, Russian, English,* (When '*the*' precedes these nouns, they refer to the population of those languages.)
- Names of sports: *cricket, football, basketball,*
- Names of discipline/subject of studies: *biology, history, computer science, mathematics,*

#### **Note:**

'*The*' is a widely used article in English. Except for the list mentioned above and proper nouns, '*the*' is used before almost all the nouns which mean

something definite/particular. The above list has some opposite factors also. Those factors are explained in the following list:

**'The' must precede:**

- Names of oceans, gulfs, seas, and rivers: *the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Coral Sea, the Timor Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Nile, the Murray River, the Darling River, etc.*
- Names of countries with united states or islands: *the United States of America (the USA), the UK, the UAE, the Philippines, etc.*
- Names of great lakes: *the Great Lakes, the African Great Lakes*
- Names of mountain **ranges**: *the Himalayas, the Alps, the Andes, etc.*
- Names of a group of Islands: *the West Indies, the Andamans, etc.*