**Articles – Reading Material**

**Overview:**

Do you make the right references, do your sentences pose a challenge to people as they are not specific.

How do you ensure you sound right while speaking and writing?

**Objectives:**

This reading material is designed to help you:

* Understand the basic rules of using articles.
* When not to use something is equally important as knowing when to use it. So, you will also understand instances when the usage is unnecessary.

**Definition of Articles**

English has two types of articles: [definite](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslart.html#definite) (*the*) and indefinite (*a, an*.) The use of these articles depends mainly on whether you are referring to any member of a group, or to a specific member of a group:

**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 b****oy*

 **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: ***an e****lephant*

 **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: ***a u****ser* (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* b**roken egg

 ***an* u**nusual problem

 ***a* Eur**opean country (sounds like '**yer**-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***

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)  ***an*** apple (any apple) | ***the*** dog (that specific dog)  ***the*** apple (that specific apple) |
| **Plural** | ***some*** dogs (any dogs)  ***some*** apples (any apples) | ***the*** dogs (those specific dogs)  ***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 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)

**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:

 Countable vs. noncountable

 First vs. subsequent mention

 General vs. specific

**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](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslcount.html).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I dove into ***the*** water. (How many waters did you dive  into? The question doesn't make any sense because  *water* is noncountable. 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 afterward 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 the 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 noncountable, others simply never take either article.

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

**1. Names of languages and nationalities**

a. Chinese b. English c. Spanish d. Russian

**2. Names of sports**

a. volleyball b. hockey

c. baseball

**3. Names of academic subjects**

a. mathematics b. Biology

c. history

d. computer science

**Basic Rules for Using Articles**

“Where should I use the articles *a, an,* and *the* in my sentences? Which one should I use? When should I omit an article?” Most English Language students become confused and frustrated by the usage of these three small words because there are so many rules to learn as well as exceptions to the rules. Hopefully, this short guide will give you a clearer understanding how to use articles.

**Definition: The words *a, an,* and *the* form a special group of adjectives called articles**.

**Articles have only one function: they signal that a noun is coming.**

Examples (Nouns are underlined.):

*The* brightly colored birds are from Brazil. *An* unwelcome guest arrived at *the* party. *The* movie had *a* surprise ending.

Use *a* if the following word (the noun or adjective modifying the noun) begins with a consonant; use *an* if the following word begins with a vowel. This rule allows the article and the next word to be spoken together easily.

**Types: There are two types of articles: definite and indefinite.**

**Definite article:** *The* is called a definite article because it precedes a noun which names a specific member of a group. This type of noun is called a specific (definite) noun. Both the writer (or speaker) and the reader (or listener) know the identity of this noun.

Examples:

*The* order for our office supplies was sent today.

*The* sun provides energy to help plants make food.

**Indefinite Article:** *A* and *an* are called indefinite articles because they refer to any member of a group, rather than to a specific member of the group. Neither the writer nor the reader knows the identity of the member.

Examples:

The couple visited *a* new restaurant.

To split wood safely, *an* axe must be sharpened often.

**Basic Uses of the Definite Article *The*:**

**1. Use *the* before singular or plural definite (specific) nouns.** Their identity is already known to the reader for one of the following reasons:

a. The noun has already been mentioned.

b. The noun is followed by a phrase or clause which identifies the noun.

Example: A journalist interviewed *the*  engineer who designed the plane.

c. A superlative adjective precedes the noun.

Example: John is the fastest runner on the team. (There can be only one fastest runner.)

Note: An adjective before a plural or non-count noun does not make the noun specific (definite). The noun is specific because it is preceded by *the*.

d. The noun is unique; there is only one in existence.

Example: Thousands of tourists visit *the*  Statue of Liberty yearly.

e. The context makes the noun’s identity clear.

Example: My friends bought movie tickets at the box office.

**2. Do not use *the* before**

a. Plural nouns meaning “all” or “in general:”

Example: People look forward to vacations from their jobs.

b. Most singular proper nouns (See “Special Rules” for exceptions).

Example: Remember to call Maria in two hours.

**Basic Uses of the Indefinite Article *A/An*:**

**1. Use *a/an* before singular nouns when the noun is general (indefinite, non-specific, one of many).**

Examples:

*A* small salmon rested on the stream bottom.

The traveler ordered *an* egg and toast for breakfast.

**2. Use *a* before the first mention of a singular noun.**

**3. In order to use *a/an* with noncount nouns you must include a quantifier (“a little,” “a great deal of”) or a unit phrase (“a piece of,” “a quart of”) before the noun.**

Examples:

*A little*  encouragement can make a big difference. The cook bought *a large piece of* ginger.

**Use of Articles when an Adjective Precedes a Noun:**

**1. Do not use an article before an adjective which precedes a general non-count noun.**

Example:

He earned more money this year than last year. (No article is used before

“more.”)

**Exception to this rule:** Do use *the* before an adjective preceding a non-count noun if the noun is made specific (definite) by a following phrase or clause.

Example:

Mike painted *the*  house which he had recently purchased.

**2. Use *the* before an adjective which describes a group of people but is not followed by a noun. The adjective takes the place of the noun.**

Example:

The nurse was trained to care for *the*  elderly.

**Special Rules:**

**1. Places**:

**a. *Names of countries:*** Do not use *the* unless the name refers to a group or has the

word “of” within the name.

Examples:

I traveled to China last summer.

*The* United States of America was established in 1776.

**b. *Cities and streets:*** Do not use articles before cities and streets.

Example:

The shop is located at 3572 Travert Avenue in Seattle.

**c. *Rivers, oceans, seas, groups of mountains and islands:*** Use *the* before nouns naming these geographical features.

Example:

The Lewis and Clark Expedition traveled up *the*  Missouri River.

**d. *Schools:*** Use *the* when “of” is part of the school’s name. Otherwise, omit the

article.

Examples:

She plans to attend *the* University of Washington.

My two friends both received scholarships to Whitman College.

**e. *Location vs. Activity (for a few nouns):***

1) When a noun naming a place is used in a phrase referring to an activity, no article is needed before the noun.

Examples:

“to school”: Most children ride the bus to school.

“to church”: The family goes to church regularly.

2) When the same noun is used simply to name the location, use either a definite or indefinite article as usual.

Examples:

The workers arrived to remodel *the* school.

The new family visited *a* church in their neighborhood.

**2. Titles of People:**

**a. A title followed by a name:** Do not use an article.

Example:

On Monday, President Hosford will meet with his advisors.

**b. A title without a name:** Use *the.*

Example:

The committee members met with *the*  president of the company.

**3. Numbers:**

**a. Cardinal numbers:** Do not use an article before cardinal numbers (number words that name a quantity) when the number word functions as a noun.

Examples:

The customer admired the artist’s paintings enough to buy one.

He removed thirty of the fifty trees on his property. (In this sentence

“thirty” is a noun whereas “fifty” is an adjective modifying trees.)

**b. Ordinal numbers:** Use *the* before ordinal numbers (number words such as

“first, “second,” and “third” that indicate order in a sequence.

Examples:

*The* fifteenth page is missing. (“Fifteenth”functions as an adjective.) Mary was *the* third to drop out of the race. (“Fifteenth” functions as a noun.)

**4. Things shared by a family or community:** Use *the* before these nouns.

Examples:

Many homes have a microwave in *the*  kitchen.

Citizens are invited to speak to *the* city council about problems.

*The* mayor visited *the*  library.

**5. Expressions that identify part of a larger group:** Use *the* before the nouns in these expressions.

Examples:

“one of the (plural noun)” One of *the*  students was absent.

“both of the (plural noun)” She enjoyed both of *the*  performances.

“some of the (plural noun)” The instructor returned some of *the*  essays today.

“some of the (non count noun)” Some of *the* stolen money was recovered.

**6. Second mention as a synonym:** Use *the* before a noun used as a synonym for a word or words that have already been mentioned.

Example:

Please buy fruit, vegetables, meat, and milk; deliver *the*  groceries to your uncle.

***"A*" goes before all words that begin with consonants.**

 a cat

 a dog

 a purple onion

 a buffalo

 a big apple

**with one exception**: Use *an* before unsounded *h*.

 an honorable peace

 an honest error

***"An"* goes before all words that begin with vowels:**

 an apricot

 an egg

 an Indian

 an orbit

 an uprising

**with two exceptions**: 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.

 a union

 a united front

 a unicorn

 a used napkin

 a U.S. ship

 a one-legged man