

## What is an article?

- Articles (**a**, **an**, **the**) are determiners or noun markers that function to specify if the noun is general or specific in its reference. Often the article chosen depends on if the writer and the reader understand the reference of the noun.
- The articles **a** and **an** are indefinite articles. They are used with a singular countable noun when the noun referred to is nonspecific or generic.
- The article **the** is a definite article. It is used to show specific reference and can be used with both singular and plural nouns and with both countable and uncountable nouns.

Many languages do not use articles (**a**, **an**, and **the**), or if they do exist, the way they are used may be different than in English. Multilingual writers often find article usage to be one of the most difficult concepts to learn. Although there are some rules about article usage to help, there are also quite a few exceptions. Therefore, learning to use articles accurately takes a long time. To master article usage, it is necessary to do a great deal of reading, notice how articles are used in published texts, and take notes that can apply back to your own writing.

## A few important definitions to keep in mind:

- **Countable noun:** The noun has both a singular and plural form. The plural is usually formed by adding an –s or an –es to the end of it.
  - one horse, two horses
  - one chair, two chairs
  - one match, two matches

Countable nouns may also have irregular plural forms. Many of these forms come from earlier forms of English.

- one child, two children
  - one mouse, two mice
- **Uncountable noun:** The noun refers to something that cannot be counted. It does not have a plural form.
  - Information
  - Grammar
- **Proper noun:** The name of a person, place, or organization and is spelled with capital letters.
  - Tim Smith
  - McDonalds

# A/An

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## When to use *a* or *an*

**A** and **an** are used with singular countable nouns when the noun is nonspecific or generic.

- I do not own **a** car.
  - In this sentence, **car** is a singular countable noun that is not specific. It could be any car.
- She would like to go to **a** university that specializes in teaching.
  - **University** is a singular countable noun. Although it begins with a vowel, the first sound of the word is /j/ or “y.” Thus, **a** instead of **an** is used. In this sentence, it is also generic (it could be any university with this specialization, not a specific one).
- I would like to eat **an** apple.
  - In this sentence, **apple** is a singular countable noun that is not specific. It could be any apple.

**A** is used when the noun that follows begins with a consonant sound.

- **a** book
- **a** pen
- **a** uniform (Note that *uniform* starts with a vowel, but the first sound is /j/ or a “y” sound. Therefore **a** instead of **an** is used here.)

**An** is used when the noun that follows begins with a vowel sound.

- **an** elephant
- **an** American
- **an** MBA (Note that *MBA* starts with a consonant, but the first sound is /ɛ/ or a short “e” sound. Therefore, **an** instead of **a** is used here.)

Sometimes **a** or **an** can be used for first mention (the first time the noun is mentioned). Then, in subsequent sentences, the article **the** is used instead.

- He would like to live in **a** large house. **The** house should have at least three bedrooms and two bathrooms.
  - In the first sentence (first mention), **a** is used because it is referring to a nonspecified house. In the second sentence, **the** is used because now the house has been specified.

# The

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## When to use *the*

**The** is used with both singular and plural nouns and with both countable and uncountable nouns when the noun is specific.

- **The** *book* that I read last night was great.
  - In this sentence, *book* is a singular, countable noun. It is also specific because of the phrase “that I read last night.” The writer and reader (or speaker and listener) know which book is being referred to.
- **The** *books* assigned for this class are very useful.
  - In this sentence, *books* is a plural, countable noun. It is also specific because of the phrase “for this class.” The writer and reader (or speaker and listener) know which books are being referred to.
- **The** *advice* you gave me was very helpful.
  - In this sentence, *advice* is an uncountable noun. However, it is specific because of the phrase “you gave me.” It is clear which piece of advice was helpful.

Here are some more specifics:

**The** is used in the following categories of proper nouns:

- **Museums and art galleries:** **the** Walker Art Center, **the** Minneapolis Institute of Art
- **Buildings:** **the** Empire State Building, **the** Willis Tower
- **Seas and oceans:** **the** Mediterranean Sea, **the** Atlantic Ocean
- **Rivers:** **the** Mississippi, **the** Nile
- **Deserts:** **the** Sahara Desert, **the** Sonora Desert
- **Periods and events in history:** **the** Dark Ages, **the** Civil War
- **Bridges:** **the** London Bridge, **the** Mackinac Bridge
- **Parts of a country:** **the** South, **the** Upper Midwest

In general, use **the** with plural proper nouns.

- **the** Great Lakes
- **the** French
- **the** Rockies (as in the Rocky Mountains)

**The** is often used with proper nouns that include an “of” phrase.

- **the** United States of America

- **the** University of Minnesota
- **the** International Swimming Hall of Fame

Use **the** when the noun being referred to is unique because of our understanding of the world.

- **The** Earth moves around **the** sun.
- Wolves howl at **the** moon.

Use **the** when a noun can be made specific from a previous mention in the text. This is also known as second or subsequent mention.

- My son bought a cat. I am looking after **the** cat while he is on vacation.
- I read a good book. **The** book was about how to use articles correctly in English.

**The** is used with superlative adjectives, which are necessarily unique (*the first, the second, the biggest, the smallest, the next, the only*, etc.).

- It was **the first** study to address the issue.
- She was **the weakest** participant.
- He was **the only** person to drop out of the study.