

## Articles

There are three articles in the English language: *a*, *an*, and *the*. Articles signal that a noun is coming up, and they tell us whether the noun is general or specific.

### Use of a/an

*A* and *an* are indefinite articles. They are used to refer to a non-specific noun.

For example:

- “I would love to read a book.” In this case, I’m not talking about a specific book. I’d love to read *any* book. Since it’s non-specific, I use the article *a*.
- “Call an ambulance!” This refers to *any* ambulance. I don’t want a specific ambulance; I want any ambulance that is available.

*A* is used when the noun is singular and begins with a consonant sound.

*An* is used when the noun is singular and begins with a vowel sound.

For example:

- Nouns beginning with a consonant sound: a doctor, a book, a girl, a picture, a giraffe
- Nouns beginning with a vowel sound: an apple, an elephant, an introduction, an animal, an apartment

### Use of the

*The* is a definite article. It is used to refer to specific nouns. It can be used before both singular and plural nouns.

For example:

- “The lions at the zoo were hungry.” This sentence refers to a specific group of lions (the lions at the zoo).
- “The cat with black stripes purred.” This sentence refers to a specific cat (the one with black stripes).

*The* is also the only article that can be used with noncount nouns, which are nouns (like water, money, air, milk, homework, etc.) that cannot be counted by being divided into smaller parts

and have no plural form. *A* and *an* are only used before count nouns, which are nouns that can be counted and have both a plural and singular form.

However, noncount nouns also don't always need an article. *The* is used with noncount nouns only when referring to something specific.

For example:

- "The water is salty." This sentence, where we've included "the" before "water," refers to a specific body of water.
- "Water is salty." This sentence, where we do not include "the" before "water," refers to all water.

## When Not to Use an Article

Do not use an article if you are referring to:

- Languages or nationalities: Chinese, French, Spanish
- Sports: volleyball, football
- Subjects: math, English, computer science
- Proper Nouns (names): Jacob, Kentucky, Microsoft

## Articles Combined with Adjectives

Articles go before the adjectives describing a noun. For example:

- "The pretty flower"
- "A long journey"
- "An unhappy student"

## Flowchart<sup>1</sup>

The next page includes a flow chart that might help you decide whether and when to include articles in your sentences!

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<sup>1</sup> WSU Writing Center, "Articles," Washington State University, accessed September 3, 2020, <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/1393/2018/01/Articles.pdf>.

