



WRITING CENTER

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The Use and Non-Use of Articles

Articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*) are words that indicate nouns and specify their application. Different articles are used depending on whether a noun is countable or noncountable, definite or indefinite, first mention or subsequent mention, and general or specific.

Countable vs. Noncountable

Can the noun be counted?

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

- She bought *a* cookie. (The use of *a* here indicates that she bought only one cookie.)
- I ate *a* piece of cake.
- They saw *an* eagle.

The is used when the noun cannot be counted.

- I bought *the* milk. (How many milks did you buy? The question doesn't make any sense because milk is noncountable. Therefore, use *the*.)
- I ate *the* soup.
- We saw *the* juice spill.

Indefinite Articles: *a* and *an* (and *some*)

Can the noun refer to any member of a group?

A and *an* are used if the noun modified is indefinite, which means that the noun can refer to any member of a group. If the indefinite noun is singular, use *a* or *an*. If the indefinite noun is plural, use *some*. The rule is:

- I saw *a* boy.
- He picked *an* apple.
- I met *some* girls.

Additionally, use indefinite articles to indicate membership in a profession, nationality, or religion.

- I am *a* cashier.
- Eric is *a* German.
- He is *a* Hindu.

Definite Article: *the*

Does the noun refer to a specific member of a group?

The is used if the noun modified is definite, which means that the noun refers to a specific member of a group. Compare the indefinite and definite articles in the following pairs:

- *A* chair (any chair)
- *The* chair (that specific chair)
- *An* oven (any oven)
- *The* oven (that specific oven)

The is used with both singular and plural nouns:

- *The* chair, *the* oven
- *The* chairs, *the* ovens

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

- *The* energy that filled the room was electric.
- *The* knowledge that she gained is incredibly valuable.

The is **not** used with noncountable nouns that refer to something generally:

- [*no article*] Knowledge is powerful.
- She had lots of [*no article*] energy.

Geographical uses of *the*

Do not use *the* before:

- Names of countries (Japan, Bolivia, Canada), except the Netherlands and the US
- Names of cities, towns, or states (Cleveland, Paris)
- Names of streets (High St., Pacemont Rd.)
- Names of lakes and bays (Lake Huron, Lake Erie), except with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes
- Names of mountains (Mount Kilimanjaro), except with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Rockies or unusual names like the Matterhorn
- Names of continents (North America, Asia)
- Names of islands 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, the Sea of Japan)
- Points on the globe (the Equator, the North Pole)
- Geographical areas (the North, the Middle East)
- Deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula)

First vs. Subsequent Mention

Is this the first time the noun has been mentioned in the piece of writing?

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, as you are now referring to a specific, previously-mentioned noun.

- I gave a presentation on how to make an apple pie to the home economics class. The presentation was a huge success.

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

General vs. Specific

Is the noun general or specific?

Sometimes, the noun refers to the whole class to which individual nouns belong. The usage of articles with these nouns is called generic. While the generic article looks like the indefinite article, the rules that govern them are different. The indefinite article refers to any one member of a group, while the generic article refers to all members of a group.

- *A* dog is an excellent companion. (indefinite article: any individual dog)
- *The* dog is a loyal and affectionate pet. (generic article: all dogs – dog as a generic category)

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

- No article with a plural noun: Dogs are loyal and affectionate. (all dogs)
- No article with a noncountable noun: Freedom is a valuable right. (any kind of freedom)

Omission of Articles

Some nouns don't take any article. Some examples of these nouns are:

- **Names of languages and nationalities**

Chinese
English
Spanish

- **Names of sports**

Volleyball
Hockey
Baseball

- **Names of academic subjects**

- Mathematics

- Biology

- History

- Computer science