ARTICLES

Articles are words that are used to modify nouns. In this way, their function is similar to that of adjectives.

Articles are used to express whether a noun is specific or general. There are two types of articles in the English language: the **definite article** and the **indefinite article**.

DEFINITE VERSUS INDEFINITE ARTICLES

The *specificity* of a noun determines whether a definite or indefinite article is needed.

If the noun being discussed is a specific or particular item (or group of items), then a **definite article** is needed.

> I saw *the* movie *Spider-Man: No Way Home* last night.
>
> In this sentence, the word *the* refers to a specific noun—the movie *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

Contrastingly, if the noun being discussed is not a specific item (or group of items), then an **indefinite article** is needed.

> Do you want to see *a* movie tonight?
>
> In this sentence, the word *a* refers to an unspecific noun—*any* movie (not one in particular).

DEFINITE ARTICLE—*THE*

The definite article (*the*) is used before specific nouns. The word *the* restricts the meaning of a noun to one particular thing (or a particular group of things). In other words, a definite article refers to a single member of a larger group.

> Did you like *the* book? Which book? *The* one I lent you last week.
>
> In both cases, the *the* refers to a particular book (the one that was lent) out of a larger group (all books).

The definite article can be used with singular or plural nouns.

Singular:

> Be sure to study for *the* exam on Friday.
>
> Here, *the* refers to a specific exam (the one taking place on Friday).

Plural:

> I have to wash *the* dishes.
>
> Here, *the* refers to a specific set of dishes (likely the dishes the subject owns).

GEOGRAPHICAL USE OF *THE*

The rules for using *the* before geographical locations are somewhat complicated. The table below demonstrates when *the* should and should not be used before a location.

<ins>DO NOT</ins> Use Before:	<ins>DO</ins> Use Before:
MOST COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES: Canada, France, Egypt, Mexico, Japan, Yukon	**CERTAIN COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES:** *the* Netherlands, *the* United States, *the* Philippines, *the* Dominican Republic, *the* Northwest Territories
CONTINENTS: North America, Europe, Asia, Africa	**POINTS ON THE GLOBE:** *the* North Pole, *the* Equator
CITIES, TOWNS, PROVINCES AND STATES: Toronto, New York, Newfoundland	**GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS:** *the* Middle East, *the* West
STREET NAMES: Water St., Elizabeth Ave., Prince Phillip Dr.	**RIVERS, OCEANS, AND SEAS:** *the* Nile, *the* Atlantic, *the* Red Sea
LAKES AND BAYS: Lake Superior, Hudson Bay	**GROUPS OF LAKES AND GULFS:** *the* Great Lakes, *the* Gulf of Mexico
MOUNTAINS: Mount Everest, Mount Kilimanjaro	**MOUNTAIN RANGES, DESERTS, AND FORESTS:** *the* Andes, *the* Rockies, *the* Sahara, *the* Amazon Rain Forest

ISLANDS: Easter Island, Honolulu, Bora Bora, Santorini	ISLAND CHAINS AND PENINSULAS: *the* Canary Islands, *the* Bahamas

INDEFINITE ARTICLE—*A/AN*

The indefinite article (a/an) is used before unspecific nouns. Indefinite articles refer to any member of a group to make a general statement. The indefinite article may be used if the subject is unknown or if its identity is unimportant.

> I have to read *a* book for a report next month.

> The *a* refers to *any* book (not one in particular).

> Is there *an* exam in this course?

> The *an* refers to an exam in *general*.

Indefinite articles can also be used to indicate a noun's membership within a group.

> She is *a* doctor. (She belongs to the larger group of people who are doctors.)

> I am *a* Canadian. (I am a member of the group of people who have Canadian citizenship.)

CHOOSING BETWEEN *A* AND *AN*

Choosing between the indefinite articles *a* and *an* depends on whether the word that follows begins with a vowel or a consonant sound.

The indefinite article *an* allows for easier pronunciation of words beginning with a vowel sound. The same rules apply for choosing an article before a noun or an adjective.

The article *a* should be used before:

1. **Words beginning with consonants**

    a **t**ree

    a **r**ainbow

    a **w**indy day

2. **Words beginning with a pronounced "h" sound**

    a **h**ouse

    a **h**appy time

    a **h**and

    a **h**elpful tip

Note: Some words that begin with a pronounced "h" sound can be preceded by the article *an*

> It was *an* historical moment in the country's history. ("It was *a* historical moment in the country's history" is more commonly used.)

3. **Words beginning with *consonant sounds* (i.e., vowels that take on consonant sounds)**

    a **un**iversity

    (Here, the letter *u* makes a "*yoo*" sound, so the word is treated as if it begins with the consonant *y*.)

    a **one**-hour break (*one* is pronounced *won*, so it is treated as if it begins with a *w*)

    a **Eur**opean country

4. **Letters pronounced individually or at the beginning of an acronym that form consonant sounds**

    A **D**VD copy of the film is available.

    The word "usher" begins with *a* "**u**".

    The reference contained *a* **U**RL link.

The article *an* should be used before:

1. **Words beginning with a vowel (that are pronounced as vowels)**

    an **a**pple

    an **e**arly morning

    an **i**ce cream cone

    an **o**pen door

    an **u**nderwater camera

2. **Words beginning with a silent "h" sound**

    an h**o**ur

    (Here, the word *hour* is pronounced *our*, so it is treated as if it begins with the vowel *o.*)

    an h**o**nest mistake

    an h**o**nour

3. **Letters pronounced individually or at the beginning of acronyms that form vowel sounds**

    The word "shoe" begins with *an* "**s**".

    (Here, the letter *s* is pronounced *ess*, so it is treated as if it begins with the vowel *e.*)

    An **M**BA degree can improve one's business skills.

    (Here, the letter "M" is pronounced *em*, so the acronym is treated as if it begins with the vowel *e.*)

Note: Some acronyms may be pronounced as if they were a normal word and therefore the article used should agree with that pronunciation.

> *A* **S**CUBA diver
>
> (The acronym SCUBA is pronounced "Scooba", so *an* is the appropriate article.)

COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

Countable Nouns:

Countable, or count nouns are things that can easily be counted. Such nouns should be preceded by **indefinite articles**.

> The recipe calls for *an* egg (eggs can easily be counted, so the indefinite article is needed).
>
> There was *a* dog at the park.
>
> He ordered *a* bottle of water.

Uncountable Nouns:

Uncountable nouns are things that cannot be easily counted. These can be abstract or intangible things (e.g., knowledge, creativity, air), liquids (e.g., water, juice), a collection of objects (e.g., equipment, furniture, clothing) or things that are too numerous to count (e.g., salt, rice, wood).

Such nouns should be preceded by **definite articles** if the sentence refers to specific nouns, or **the article can be omitted altogether** if the noun is general.

> *The* electricity was knocked out by the storm (i.e., the city or the building's *specific* electricity).
>
> *Electricity* is needed to power the factory (i.e., *some* or *any* electricity; electricity in *general*).

He enjoyed looking at *the* art on display at the museum (i.e., the *specific* art at one particular museum).

He studied *art* in college (i.e., art in *general*).

Add *the* sugar and *the* milk to the mixture (i.e., the *specific* milk and sugar that were likely mentioned before).

Sugar and *milk* are key ingredients to the recipe (i.e., *any* sugar and milk).

Note: Uncountable nouns can also be preceded by words like *some*.

> Can you pick up *some* cheese at the grocery store?

Note: Some nouns can be countable or uncountable depending on the context they are used in.

Countable: She heard *a* noise down the hall.
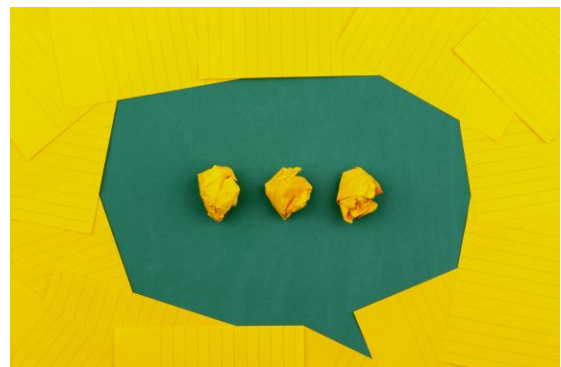
Uncountable: I couldn't concentrate because of all of *the* noise in the room.

Countable: Pick *a* time to meet.

Uncountable: Now is *the* time to act.

Countable: She straightened *a* hair that was out of place.

Uncountable: The stylist swept up *the* hair that was on the floor.

OMISSION OF ARTICLES

Sometimes, articles should be left out altogether depending on the context of the sentence. In these cases, the article is implied though it is not actually written and is sometimes referred to as the **zero article**.

The zero article should be used:

1. **With uncountable nouns that are referred to generally:**

   Incorrect: He values *the* honesty above all else.

   Correct: He values *honesty* above all else.

2. **Before plural countable nouns that are referred to generally:**

   Dogs are easy to train, but *cats* are not.

   (This is a general statement about all dogs and cats. If the sentence were referring to specific dogs and specific cats, articles should be used.)

3. **Before certain geographical locations:**

   See table.

4. **Before languages and nationalities:**

   Incorrect: Do you speak *the* French?

   Correct: Do you speak *French*?

Note: The definite article can be used before a nationality to make a general statement about a population.

   The French are renowned for their culinary exploits.

5. **Before school subjects:**

   Incorrect: I am studying *the* math in school.

   Correct: I am studying *math* in school.

6. **Before sports:**

   Incorrect: She has been playing *the* hockey for three years.

   Correct: She has been playing *hockey* for three years.

7. **Before the names of meals:**

   What would you like for *dinner*?

   I am going to the cafeteria to eat *lunch*.

Note: If a sentence refers to a specific meal, an article is required.

   The dinner I had last night was delicious!

   I had *an* early breakfast this morning.

8. **Before certain locations such as home, work, school, church, bed, and prison**

   I have to go to *work* today.

   (Here, the absence of an article implies that the location is where the speaker works)

   She drove her kids to *school*.

   (Here, the absence of an article implies that the location is where the subject's children attend school.)

   Go to *bed*, it's late!

   The robber is in *prison* now.

9. **Before or after a pronoun (*my, his, her, their, etc.)*:**

    Incorrect: The party is at *the* their house.

    Correct: The party is at *their* house.

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