

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

In English there are three articles: *a*, *an*, and *the*. Articles are used before nouns or noun equivalents and are a type of adjective. The definite article (*the*) is used before a noun to indicate that the identity of the noun is known to the reader. The indefinite article (*a*, *an*) is used before a noun that is general or when its identity is not known. There are certain situations in which a noun takes no article.

As a guide, the following definitions and table summarize the basic use of articles. Continue reading for a more detailed explanation of the rules and for examples of how and when to apply them.

Definite article

the (before a singular or plural noun)

Indefinite article

a (before a singular noun beginning with a consonant sound)

an (before a singular noun beginning with a vowel sound)

Count nouns - refers to items that can be counted and are either singular or plural

Non-count nouns - refers to items that are not counted and are always singular

	COUNT NOUNS	NON-COUNT NOUNS
Rule #1 Specific identity not known	<i>a, an</i>	(no article)
Rule #2 Specific identity known	<i>the</i>	<i>the</i>
Rule #3 All things <i>or</i> things in general	(no article)	(no article)

For the purposes of understanding how articles are used, it is important to know that nouns can be either **count** (can be counted) or **noncount** (indefinite in quantity and cannot be counted). In addition, count nouns are either **singular** (one) or **plural** (more than one). **Noncount** nouns are always in **singular** form.

For example, if we are speaking of water that has been spilled on the table, there can be one drop (**singular**) or two or more drops (**plural**) of water on the table. The word *drop* in this example is a **count** noun because we can count the number of drops. Therefore, according to the rules applying to **count** nouns, the word *drop* would use the articles *a* or *the*.

However, if we are speaking of water in general spilled on the table, it would not be appropriate to count *one water* or *two waters* -- there would simply be *water* on the table. Water is a **noncount** noun. Therefore, according to the rules applying to **noncount** nouns, the word *water* would use *no article* or *the*, but not *a*.

Following are the three specific rules which explain the use of definite and indefinite articles.

Rule #1 - Specific identity not known: Use the indefinite article *a* or *an* only with a singular count noun whose specific identity is not known to the reader. Use *a* before nouns that begin with a consonant sound, and use *an* before nouns that begin with a vowel sound.

- Use the article *a* or *an* to indicate any non-specified member of a group or category.

*I think **an** animal is in the garage*

*That man is **a** scoundrel.*

*We are looking for **an** apartment.*

- Use the article *a* or *an* to indicate one in number (as opposed to more than one).

*I own **a** cat and two dogs.*

- Use the article *a* before a consonant sound, and use *an* before a vowel sound.

***a** boy, **an** apple*

◇ Sometimes an adjective comes between the article and noun:

***an** unhappy boy, **a** red apple*

- The plural form of *a* or *an* is *some*. Use *some* to indicate an unspecified, limited amount (but more than one).

***an** apple, **some** apples*

Rule #2 - Specific identity known: Use the definite article *the* with any noun (whether singular or plural, count or noncount) when the specific identity of the noun is known to the reader, as in the following situations:

- Use the article *the* when a particular noun has already been mentioned previously.

*I ate **an** apple yesterday. **The** apple was juicy and delicious.*

- Use the article *the* when an adjective, phrase, or clause describing the noun clarifies or restricts its identity.

***The** boy sitting next to me raised his hand.*

*Thank you for **the** advice you gave me.*

- Use the article *the* when the noun refers to something or someone that is unique.

***the** theory of relativity*

***the** 2003 federal budget*

Rule #3 - All things or things in general: Use *no article* with plural count nouns or any noncount nouns used to mean *all* or *in general*.

Trees are beautiful in the fall. (All trees are beautiful in the fall.)

He was asking for advice. (He was asking for advice in general.)

I do not like coffee. (I do not like all coffee in general.)

Additional Information Regarding the Use of Articles

- When indicating an unspecified, limited amount of a **count** or **noncount** noun, use *some*.

My cousin was seeking some advice from a counselor (not advice in general or advice about everything, but a limited amount of advice).

I would love some coffee right now (not coffee in general, but a limited amount of coffee).

We might get rain tomorrow. Some rain would be good for the crops (a certain amount of rain, as opposed to rain in general).

There are some drops of water on the table (a limited number, but more than one drop).

- **Noncount nouns** are those which usually cannot be counted. Following are some common examples:
 - ◇ **Certain food and drink items:** bacon, beef, bread, broccoli, butter, cabbage, candy, cauliflower, celery, cereal, cheese, chicken, chocolate, coffee, corn, cream, fish, flour, fruit, ice cream, lettuce, meat, milk, oil, pasta, rice, salt, spinach, sugar, tea, water, wine, yogurt
 - ◇ **Certain nonfood substances:** air, cement, coal, dirt, gasoline, gold, paper, petroleum, plastic, rain, silver, snow, soap, steel, wood, wool
 - ◇ **Most abstract nouns:** advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, employment, fun, happiness, health, honesty, information, intelligence, knowledge, love, poverty, satisfaction, truth, wealth
 - ◇ **Areas of study:** history, math, biology, etc.
 - ◇ **Sports:** soccer, football, baseball, hockey, etc.
 - ◇ **Languages:** Chinese, Spanish, Russian, English, etc.
 - ◇ **Other:** clothing, equipment, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, lumber, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, traffic, transportation, violence, weather, work
- Geographical names are confusing because some require the and some do not.
 - ◇ **Use *the with*:** united countries, large regions, deserts, peninsulas, oceans, seas, gulfs, canals, rivers, mountain ranges, groups of islands

the Gobi Desert

the United Arab Emirates

the Sacramento River

the Aleutians

◇ **Do not use *the with*:** streets, parks, cities, states, counties, most countries, continents, bays, single lakes, single mountains, islands

Japan

Chico

Mt. Everest

San Francisco Bay

Examples of the Use of Articles

*I do not want **a** gun in my house* (any gun).

***The** gun is in his closet* (implies there is a specific gun).

I am afraid of guns (all guns in general).

*She sent me **a** postcard from Italy* (an unspecific postcard - not a letter, not an e-mail).

*It's **the** postcard that I have in my office* (one specific postcard).

Getting postcards makes me want to travel (any postcard in general).

*I have **a** dog* (one dog).

***The** dog is very friendly* (the dog that I have already mentioned).

Dogs make great pets (dogs in general).

Greta needs furniture in her apartment (furniture is a noncount noun).

*She is going to select **the** furniture that she needs* (the specific furniture that she needs).

*She hopes to find **some** furniture this weekend* (an unspecified, limited amount of furniture).

*We are going to see **the** Statue of Liberty this weekend* (the only Statue of Liberty).