

Help with Articles

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uns and noun phrases

576 Articles

Articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*) are a type of determiner. In English, choosing which article to use — or whether to use an article at all — can be challenging. Although there are exceptions, the following general guidelines can help.

Using *a* or *an*

Use *a* and *an*, indefinite articles, with singular count nouns. Use *a* before a consonant sound (*a car*) and *an* before a vowel sound (*an uncle*). Consider sound rather than spelling: *a house*, *an hour*. Do not use indefinite articles with plural count nouns or with noncount nouns.

A or *an* tells readers they do not have enough information to identify specifically what the noun refers to (in other words, it's an unspecified,

These determiners	can precede these noun types	Examples
<i>a, an, any, each</i>	singular count nouns some noncount nouns	<i>a book, an American</i> <i>each word</i> <i>every Buddha's</i>
<i>this, that</i>	singular count nouns noncount nouns	<i>this book</i> <i>that milk</i>
<i>a little, much</i>	noncount nouns	<i>a little milk</i> <i>much affection</i>
<i>some, enough</i>	noncount nouns plural count nouns	<i>some milk, enough trouble</i> <i>some books</i> <i>enough problems</i>
<i>the</i>	singular count nouns plural count nouns noncount nouns	<i>the doctor</i> <i>the doctors</i> <i>the information</i>
<i>these, those, (a) few, many, both, several</i>	plural count nouns	<i>these books, those plans</i> <i>a few ideas</i> <i>many students</i> <i>both hands, several trees</i>

Using the

The definite article *the* is used with both count and noncount nouns whose identity is already known or is about to be made known to readers. The necessary information for identification can come from the noun phrase itself, from elsewhere in the text, from context, from general knowledge, or from a superlative.

- ▶ Let's meet at ^{the} fountain in front of Dwinelle Hall.

The phrase *in front of Dwinelle Hall* identifies the specific fountain. We know from the use of *the* that there is only one fountain in front of Dwinelle Hall.

- ▶ Last Saturday, a fire that started in a restaurant spread to a ^{The store} nearby clothing store. ^{Store} was saved, although it suffered water damage.

The word *store* is preceded by *the*, which directs our attention to the information in the previous sentence, where the store is first identified.

- ▶ She asked him to shut ^{the} door when he left her office.

She expects him to understand that she is referring to the door in her office.

- ▶ ^{The Pope} Pope is expected to visit Africa in October.

There is only one living pope, and *the* before *pope* signals that this sentence refers to him. Similar examples include *the president (of the United States)*, *the earth*, and *the moon*.

- ▶ Bill is now ^{the} best singer in the choir.

The superlative *best* identifies the noun *singer*.

Using the zero article

If a noun appears without *the*, *a* or *an*, or any other determiner (even if it is preceded by other adjectives), it is said to have a zero article. The zero article can be used with plural count nouns (*plans, assignments*), noncount nouns (*homework, information*), and proper nouns (*Carmen, New York*). With plural count nouns and noncount nouns, the zero article is used to make generalizations.

- ▶ In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes. — BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

The zero article indicates that Franklin refers not to a particular death or specific taxes but to death and taxes in general.

Here English differs from many other languages that would use the definite article to make generalizations. In English, a sentence like *The snakes are dangerous* can refer only to particular, identifiable snakes, not to snakes in general.

It is sometimes possible to make general statements with *the* or *a/an* and singular count nouns.

- ▶ *First-year college students* are confronted with many new experiences.
- ▶ *A first-year student* is confronted with many new experiences.
- ▶ *The first-year student* is confronted with many new experiences.

These sentences all make the same general statement, but the emphasis of each sentence is different. The first sentence refers to first-year college students as a group, the second focuses on a hypothetical student taken at random, and the third sentence, which is characteristic of formal written style, projects the image of a typical student as representative of the whole class.

or indefinite, noun). The writer may or may not have a particular thing in mind but in either case will use *a* or *an* if the reader lacks the information necessary for identification. Compare these sentences:

- ▶ I need *a new coat* for the winter.
- ▶ I saw *a coat* that I liked at Dayton's, but it wasn't heavy enough.

The coat in the first sentence is hypothetical rather than actual. Since it is indefinite to the writer and the reader, it is used with *a*, not *the*. The second sentence refers to an actual coat, but since the writer cannot expect the reader to know which one, it is used with *a* rather than *the*.

If you want to speak of an indefinite quantity rather than just one indefinite thing, use *some* or *any* with a noncount noun or a plural count noun. Note that *any* is used in negative sentences.

- ▶ This stew needs *some more salt*.
- ▶ I saw *some plates* that I liked at Gump's.
- ▶ This stew doesn't need *any more salt*.
- ▶ I didn't see *any plates* that I liked at Gump's.