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, 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 Gum’s.
- This stew doesn’t need any more salt.
- I didn’t see any plates that I liked at Gum’s.

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 fountain in front of Darwin Hall.
- The phrase in front of Darwin Hall identifies the specific fountain. We know from the use of the that there is only one fountain in front of Darwin Hall.
- Last Saturday, a fire that started in a restaurant spread to a nearby clothing store. The fire 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 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 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 (plants, 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.