

## 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
<b>Rule #1</b> Specific identity not known	<i>a, an</i>	(no article)
<b>Rule #2</b> Specific identity known	<i>the</i>	<i>the</i>
<b>Rule #3</b> 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 unspecified 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).*