

Advanced Article Usage in English

A useful set of rules for using articles

You can determine which article to place in front of almost any noun by answering the following three questions: Is the noun **countable** or **uncountable**? Is it **singular** or **plural**? Is it **definite** or **indefinite**?

1. A noun is countable if you can have more than one instance of it. The word *exam* is countable because you can have, say, four exams scheduled at the end of the year. The word *concentration*, however, is uncountable, because it would not make sense to speak of having four *concentrations*, even though you will need a lot of *concentration* to study for all four exams. (The exceptions to this would be in academics where it is used to talk about the choices for foci within a specific academic major and in science when you talk about *concentrations* of solutions, then the word is countable.) Many words have both countable and uncountable meanings, depending on the sentence.
2. Knowing whether the particular use of a noun is singular or plural is quite straightforward. Just ask the question, Am I referring to more than one instance of something?
3. A noun is definite when it is clear to your reader which specific instance or instances of an entity you are referring to; otherwise it is indefinite. Often the first use of a noun is indefinite and subsequent uses are definite.

When I started university, I had *a phobia* about exams. I conquered *the phobia* by writing lots of them.

Here, the first sentence establishes for the reader the existence of the writer's former phobia. By the second sentence, the reader knows exactly which phobia the writer is talking about—the one about exams just referred to in the previous sentence. The first use of a noun can be definite if the reader can figure out from context or some other clue just which instance of an entity the writer is referring to.

The point of my professor's exams was to make sure we understood *the course material*.

Note that the prepositional phrase following *point* narrows down its meaning to something very specific, while the *course material* can refer only to the material in this particular professor's course. Both nouns are therefore definite.

Once you have answered all three questions, you can use the following chart to help you choose the correct article. (The symbol \emptyset means no article.)

countable:

	Definite	Indefinite
singular	The e.g. I need to study hardest for <i>the exam</i> that I write next Wednesday.	a, an e.g. I have <i>an exam</i> to write this afternoon, and then my summer holiday finally begins.
plural	The e.g. <i>The exams</i> that I wrote last year were much easier.	\emptyset e.g. <i>Exams</i> are an inescapable fact of life for most university students.

uncountable:

	Definite	indefinite
singular	The e.g. <i>The importance</i> of studying hard cannot be exaggerated.	\emptyset e.g. Do not attach <i>importance</i> to memorizing facts.

Observe the following: If the noun is definite, it always takes the article *the*; if the noun is indefinite it never takes the article *the*. If you don't have the chart in front of you, you can still often get the article right just by remembering that simple general rule.

Using articles to refer to classes of objects

Nouns can refer to an entire group of similar objects, sometimes called a class. There are three ways to refer to a class: using (1) the definite singular, (2) the indefinite singular, or (3) the indefinite plural. Here is an example of each:

1. *The lion* is a majestic animal.
2. *A lion* is a majestic animal.
3. *Lions* are majestic animals.

All three sentences convey the same meaning with slightly different emphasis. The first sentence takes one lion as a representative of all lions and then makes its assertion about that representative. The second sentence in effect states, take any lion you like from the class of all lions, and what you say about it will be true of all other lions. The third sentence directly makes its assertion about all lions. This third usage is probably the most common. Choose whichever usage sounds best in your sentence or text.

Using Indefinite Articles

Use *a* before words such as "European" or "university" which sound like they start with a consonant even if the first letter is a vowel. Also use *A* before letters and numbers which sound like they begin with a consonant, such as "U", "J", "1" or "9". Remember, it is the **sound not the spelling** which is important. For example, "1" is spelled O-N-E; however, it is pronounced "won" like it starts with a "W".

Examples:

- She has **a** euro. *Sounds like "yu-ro"*.
- That number is **a** "1". *Sounds like "won"*.

Use *an* before words such as "hour" which sound like they start with a vowel even if the first letter is a consonant. Also use *AN* before letters and numbers which sound like they begin with a vowel, such as "F" or "8". Remember, it is the sound not the spelling which is important. For example, "F" is pronounced "eff" like it starts with an "E".

Examples:

- I only have **an** hour for lunch. *Sounds like "au-er"*.
- Does his name begin with **an** "F"? *Sounds like "eff"*.

Some words such as "herb" or "hospital" are more complicated because they are pronounced differently in different English accents. In most American accents, the "h" in "herb" is silent, so Americans usually say "an herb". In many British accents, the "h" in "herb" is pronounced, so many British say "a herb". In some British accents, the "h" in hospital is silent, so some British will say "an hospital" instead of "a hospital".

A and *an* are called indefinite articles. "Indefinite" means "not specific". Use *A(AN)* when you are talking about a thing in general, NOT a specific thing.

Examples

- I need a phone. *Not a specific phone, any phone.*
- Mark wants a bicycle. *Not a particular bicycle, a bicycle in general.*
- Do you have a driver's license? *In general*

Use *a(an)* when talking about a thing which is new, unknown, or introduced to a listener for the first time (first mention). Also, use *a(an)* when you are asking about the existence of something.

Examples:

- I have **a** car. *The car is being introduced for the first time.*
- Tom is **a** teacher. *This is new information to the listener.*
- Is there **a** dictionary in your backpack? *Asking about the existence of the dictionary*

Similarly, use *a(an)* to introduce what type of thing we are talking about.

Examples:

- That is **an** excellent book. *Describing the kind of book*
- Do you live in **a** big house? *Asking about the kind of house*
- I ate **a** thick, juicy steak. *Describing the kind of steak*

REMEMBER: You cannot use *a(an)* with plural nouns because *a(an)* means "one" or "a single".

Examples:

- I saw **a** bears in Jasper National Park. *Not Correct*
- I saw bears in Jasper National Park. *Correct*

Also, an indefinite article (*a/an*) is needed in front of professions (i.e. a doctor, a lawyer, an architect).

Finally, the indefinite article can also be used instead of *per* when giving the rate or pace of something (i.e. 10 miles per hour = 10 miles an hour).

Using the Definite Article

Many clauses and phrases make the noun known to the listener by telling the listener which person or thing we are talking about. Here is an example sentence:

Can you give me **the** book *on the table*?

We use *the* in this sentence because the phrase "on the table" tells the listener which book we are referring to. We are not talking about other books, we are talking about a specific book that the listener can see or already knows about. Learning to recognize such identifying clauses and phrases will help you use *the* correctly.

Examples:

- Did you read **the** book *which I gave you*?
- He didn't like **the** movie *that you suggested*.
- He loved **the** dessert *with chocolate and cherries*.
- **The** phone *on my desk* belongs to Ken.

- Did you know **the** man *who was talking to Leonie*?

Use *the* with nouns modified by ranking or ordering expressions such as "the first", "the second", "the third", "the next", "the last", "the previous", "the following", "the penultimate", etc.

Examples:

- This is **the** fifth day of our conference.
- I'll pay **the** next time we have dinner.
- Don't forget **the** following rule.

The can be used with plural family names to refer to the family as a group.

Examples:

- **The** Robinsons love to vacation in Florida.
- **The** Shinoharas are originally from Japan.
- My brother lives next door to **the** Jacksons.

The can be combined with certain adjectives to refer to a group of people such as "the blind", "the elderly", "the rich", "the French", "the Sioux", etc.

Examples:

- He is **elderly**. *Adjective*
- The organization helps **the elderly**. *Elderly people*

REMEMBER: This is especially important in situations where nationalities or ethnic groups and their languages might be confused. In such situations, *the* is used to specify that we are talking about the nationality or ethnic group rather than the language.

Examples:

- I like **French**. *Language*
- I like **the French**. *The French people*

The is often used with comparative forms (bigger) rather than superlative forms (biggest) when comparing only two things. This is commonly used in phrases such as "the bigger of the two".

Examples:

- Jessie and Shauna are both smart. But I think Shauna is **the** smarter of the two.
- Between Jason's son and his daughter, his daughter is **the** better athlete.

The definite article is used in front of things generally regarded as unique (i.e. the sun, the moon, etc.).

- Because nouns preceded by superlative adjectives (ending in *-est*) and ordinal numbers (first, second, etc.) are by their very nature unique, they too require the definite article.
Exception: Spoken American English drops *the* in dates.

The is used in front of oceans, seas, rivers, island and mountain chains, deserts, countries with plural names, and noun forms of points of the compass (not the actual compass direction). (See pages 13 and 14 for more information on compass directions and their usage.)

The is used in titles and place names including *of* (i.e. the people of Canada).

In the case of official job titles, *the* is usually dropped if there is only one such incumbent at any given time i.e. the Prime Minister of Canada = Prime Minister of Canada

The is also used in proper names consisting of noun(s) and/or adjective(s) + noun (i.e. The Empire State Building, The English Channel, etc.).

The is used in hotel names (i.e. The Hilton, The Hotel Vancouver, etc.).

The is used for newspapers (i.e. The Vancouver Sun, The New York Times, The Boston Globe, etc.)

The is used for many larger organizations and institutions (not commercial enterprises), including those with initials that are normally spelled out (i.e. the U.N., the W.H.O., etc.). Acronyms (initials read as whole words) are treated in the same way as regular names (proper nouns) and so do not require any article (i.e. NASA, CSIS, etc.). If you are uncertain, please monitor usage in the media or consult a dictionary.

The is used for currencies (i.e. the loonie, the Euro, the peso, etc.).

In front of people's names, *the* is only used to avoid confusion. (This means that you would use it when there is more than one person by that name and need to clarify which person you are speaking about, i.e. This man is the Mark you were talking about yesterday who owns the bank.)

The can be used instead of a possessive form when referring to parts of the body and items of clothing (i.e. The shirt I am wearing does not fit well. The arm I broke last year hurts.)

Many forms of entertainment are preceded by the definite article *the*, although not usually the medium of television (i.e. the theatre, the ballet, the opera, etc.).

Using A/An or The

Not all clauses and phrases make the noun known to the listener. Some are simply descriptive. They add extra information, but they do not tell the listener which specific thing we are talking about.

Examples:

- He bought **the** house *with a big backyard*. (This combination tells the listener which specific house he bought.)
- He bought **a** house *with a big backyard*. (This combination tells the listener what kind of house he bought, but not the specific house he bought.)

When used with comparatives, both *a(an)* and *the* follow general article usage.

Examples:

- I like **the** bigger roller coaster. (There are two and this one is bigger.)
- He has **a** more expensive car than I do. (His car is generally more expensive.)

Using the Zero Article

No article is needed before abstract nouns used in a general sense (i.e. Crime does not pay.). (See **page 2 – Classes of Objects for more information.**)

No article is needed for most places consisting of just the name of a person, or the name of a person/place followed by a noun (i.e. McDonald's, Oxford University, etc.).

No article is usually needed in front of company names (i.e. Air Canada, Ford, Apple, etc.)

An article is unnecessary in official job titles if there is only one person holding this position at any given time (i.e. Justin Trudeau was (the) Prime Minister of Canada during the COVID-19 crisis.).

No article is needed in front of most roads, streets, parks, squares or bridges i.e. Robson Street, Stanley Park, Robson Square, etc. NOTE: in Canada, we tend to use *the* in front of bridge names when speaking or writing about them, but the names themselves do not include them on the signs, the Alex Fraser Bridge, the Port Mann Bridge.).

No article is needed before the names of meals, unless it is a formal occasion. (We had dinner together yesterday. / We went to a dinner celebrating the 150th birthday of Canada.)

No article is needed for the names of games or sports. (They played tennis. He enjoys playing soccer.)

No article is needed before bed, church, court, hospital, prison, school, college, university, etc. when these are used for their primary purpose. If, however, they are used for any other purposes, **the** is required. NOTE: Canada says going to **the** hospital (for all purposes).

Articles are not needed in more abstract expressions of situation like to/at sea, to/at/out of work, in/out of town, in/out of office, etc. If, however, you start talking about somewhere concrete or some place in particular, the definite article *the* is required.

No article is needed before television as a medium, only as an appliance. (i.e. I watched a show on television and left my cup on top of the television.)

There is no article before a noun followed by a categorizing letter or number. (i.e. Finish reading section B and then do exercise 2.)

- To give added emphasis, articles are often dropped in the titles of books, movies, music, and other works of art. Even if an article exists in the original title, as in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, people tend to omit this when making reference to the work in everyday speech or writing.
- To save space and boost impact, articles are usually dropped in headlines (i.e. "A Stolen Painting Found by a Tree" = "Stolen Painting Found by Tree").

Using The or Zero Article

When generalizing about nationalities or ethnic groups that end in "-ans", such as "Americans", "Mexicans", and "Hawaiians", *the* is not usually used.

Examples:

- **Americans** watch a lot of TV.
- **Germans** drink a lot of beer.

Use *the* with these groups only when talking about a specific group of them.

Examples:

- Germans are nice. The Germans I have met are friendly and caring.

Adapted from: Appleyard, David. "David Appleyard's Guide to Article Usage in English: When to Use a, an, the, or nothing at all." www.davidappleyard.com/english/articles.htm Accessed Feb 28, 2020 and <https://www.englishpage.com/articles/advanced-articles.htm>

The 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. (NOTE: It is the sound, not the letter that is important here.) *See page 3 of this document for more detail about vowel sounds.*

- 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 (when this happens, the article matches the sound of the adjective, not the 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 (meaning that there is only one of it).

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 (work can be plural in certain limited situations related to art/creation)

- 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

Adapted from: Butte College Center for Academic Success 12/19/19
<http://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/grammar/articles.html>

Special Uses

Generalizations:

English speakers often use *the* plus a singular noun when they talk about or make generalizations about certain topics, including:

- musical instruments (the piano, the guitar, the flute)
- plants (the coconut palm, the saguaro, the baobab)
- animals (the leopard, the elephant, the lowland gorilla)
- inventions (the steam engine, the plane, the light bulb)
- currencies (the dollar, the euro, the yen)
- body parts (the head, the eye, the ear)

Examples:

- I play **the** piano.
- **The** sequoia tree is native to California.
- **The** dolphin is a very intelligent animal.
- The Wright brothers invented **the** airplane.
- Right now, **the** euro is stronger than **the** dollar.
- Cheryl got poked in **the** eye.

In general, *the* is used in this way to give the noun a more abstract or conceptual sound. We say "the piano" to make it sound more like an abstract art form. Similarly, "the dolphin" sounds more like we are referring to the species. Moreover, "the plane" has a more conceptual sound that conveys the idea of invention. However, you can also make generalizations about these topics using plurals.

A Few and A Little

The expressions "a few" and "a little" mean "some" and express the idea that you have more than expected.

Examples:

- He always carries **a few** dollars for emergencies.
- He had **a little** difficulty with his homework.
- She has **a few** friends who can help her move.

HOWEVER: The expressions "few" and "little" (without an article) mean "not much" and express the idea that you have less than expected.

Examples:

- Unfortunately, I had **little** time to enjoy New York because I had to work so much.
- Sadly, he has **few** people in his life.
- They have **little** money, so their daughter cannot pay her tuition.

BUT REMEMBER: When the words "only" or "just" are used, "a few" and "a little" also emphasize the meaning "not much."

Examples:

- Unfortunately, I **only** had **a little** time to enjoy New York because I had to work so much.
- Sadly, he **just** has **a few** people in his life.
- They **only** have **a little** money, so their daughter cannot pay her tuition.

Names of Illnesses or Diseases

Generally, articles are not used with the names of illnesses or diseases.

Examples:

- Dr. Smith visits schools and universities to educate students on **AIDS**.
- Oncologists are doctors who specialize in treating **cancer**.
- There are several medications that can be used to treat **malaria**.

HOWEVER: There are some illnesses which require *THE*.

- the measles
- the flu
- the mumps
- the bubonic plague

MOREOVER: There are a few health conditions or illnesses which can be used with both *a(an)* as well as *the* and follow general article use. This category includes most aches, pains, growths, and attacks.

- a cold
- a heart attack
- a stroke
- a wart / tumor / growth / etc.
- a sore throat / sore back/ sore foot / etc.
- a headache / toothache / backache / etc.

REMEMBER: This last category follows general article use. Study the examples below.

Examples:

- John has **a** cold. **The** cold was pretty bad.
- Nancy had **a** heart attack. **The** heart attack seriously weakened her heart.
- Deb had **a** sore throat. **The** sore throat made it hard to talk.

Directions

If a direction (north, west, southeast, left, right) directly follows a verb, do not use an article with the direction.

Examples:

- We need to walk **south**.
- They drove **north** all day.
- At the stop sign, turn **left** and walk three blocks.

HOWEVER: If a direction follows a preposition, you must use *THE*.

Examples:

- We need to walk to **the** south.
- Our house is in **the** north.
- The grocery store is on **the** right.

MOREOVER: Use *the* with compass directions when referring to them as special geographic or cultural regions.

Examples:

- We love **the** South.
- Have you ever visited **the** East?
- **The** West has better national parks.

Time Expressions

Time expressions can be especially confusing. *The* is used in some time expressions such as:

- in the morning
- in the afternoon
- in the evening
- during the night
- during the day
- the day before yesterday
- the day after tomorrow
- the fall
- the summer

Examples:

- We'll meet in **the** afternoon.
- Jake loves to go camping in **the** fall.
- There was a small earthquake during **the** night.

HOWEVER: In other time expressions, no article is used:

- at night
- at noon
- at midnight
- all day
- all night
- all month
- every month

- every year
- last night
- last Friday
- yesterday
- tomorrow

Examples:

- Did you sleep well **last night**?
- I'll see you **tomorrow**.
- We are meeting for lunch **at noon**.

MOREOVER: There are some expressions which can take both *a(an)* and *the* such as:

- a/the whole day
- a/the whole month
- an/the entire year
- an/the entire decade

Examples:

- He spent **a** whole month in Hawaii. I wish I could do that.
- I took last Friday off to go to the doctor. I spent **the** whole day sitting in his office.
- When she first moved to Germany, it took **an** entire year for her to learn enough German to go shopping.
- Phil hated the '90s. He spent **the** whole decade in a dead-end job struggling to pay his rent.

<https://www.englishpage.com/articles/advanced-articles.htm>