

Articles

In this resource, you will review the function and usage of articles.

Articles serve as a type of determiner or adjective. In English, we have two types of articles: definite and indefinite.

Definite Article: The definite article points to a specific or known noun. Our only definite article is *the*. *The* is used to point to or modify a specific noun.

Indefinite Article: Indefinite articles *a/an* are used to modify the non-specific noun. Examples of the two:

- For example, if I write, “Let’s go to the restaurant.” I am talking about a specific restaurant that I and my audience or reader would know about, so I use *the*.
- If I write, “Let’s go to a restaurant.” I am talking about one of many restaurants in my area. It isn’t one that I have specifically determined, so I use *a*.

❖ Note: In order to edit for article usage, identify the nouns in each of your sentences. If you have common nouns, then you should be alert to determine if you need to furnish the noun with an article or some other type of determiner. You might remember that not all common nouns will require an article; some may need other types of determiners. Remember, proper nouns do not require an article.

Indefinite Articles: Indefinite articles (*a/an*) point to an unspecified noun and are used with singular count nouns. Remember that count nouns are those nouns that can be counted: car, tree, house, boy, girl, computer, bottle.... Indefinite articles refer to any member of a group and not a specific one. A man, An elephant, A girl, A boy. These could be any one of a group of men, elephants, girls, boys.

- Use *a* or *an* with **singular count nouns** that refer to one item of the whole class of like items. Note that *a/an* are only used with **singular count nouns**.
- Indefinite articles (*a/an*) are not used with plural count nouns or mass nouns.
- Indefinite articles tell the reader that they don’t have enough information to be specific.
- The indefinite articles also are used to express or indicate membership in a group. I am a teacher. I am an American. I am a woman. But note that all of these groups can be counted: teacher/teachers—American/Americans—Woman/women.
- **The rule governing which of the two indefinite articles to use has to do with the way they sound with the word they modify.** For instance, the word following the article, (the word the article modifies) determines which of the two indefinite articles you will use.
 - When an article modifies a noun that begins with a vowel, use *an*. Remember, the vowels are a, e, i, o, u.



- a) An apple fell off of the tree. Note the vowel *a* in the word apple. This refers to any apple. We aren't told which apple.
- b) That was an unusual occurrence. In this case, the adjective, unusual determines which indefinite to use.
- Words that begin with a consonant but have a soft or silent sound also require using *an*.
 - a) The women took an hour break. Note the silent h in hour. When you pronounce hour, it sounds like our; therefore, you will use an.
- When using abbreviations that have a vowel sound, use *an*.
 - a) She bought *an* SUV. In this instance, the s sound has an ess sound—sounds like an e sound, so use an.
- When the noun or adjective following the article begins with a consonant, you will use the article *a*.
 - a) She bought a car. Note the consonant c in the word car. It determines that you will use the indefinite article *a*.
 - b) She found a broken egg. Likewise, the b of broken determines you use the indefinite article *a*.

Definite Articles: The definite article, *the*, is used with both singular and plural count nouns when the noun is specific or particular and is used with non-count nouns whose identity is already known or is about to be made known to the readers. The identifying information about the specifics can be understood, come from phrases in the sentences, or from elsewhere in the texts.

- a) The cat that I ran over died. Not a cat but the cat that I ran over died.
- b) The elephant had large tusks. Identified by large tusks.
- c) John has the pen. John has a specific pen that is known to both the reader and the writer.

Zero Articles: Nouns that appear without an article or any other determiner are said to have a zero article. The zero articles can be used with plural count nouns, non-count nouns, and proper nouns. When the zero articles are used with plural count nouns and non-count nouns, it is a generalization.

Eggs are a good source of protein.

Apples are good for you.

Sugar is bad for your teeth.

Water is necessary for life.

Lady Gaga has a unique choice in clothing. You do not need an article with proper nouns because they are already specific. In some unique styles of writing, some writers may refer to a



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proper noun preceded by the; however, it is only used as style choice and is usually reserved in creative writing instances for emphasis.