Articles

The three articles, *a*, *an* and *the*, are always associated with nouns. Articles define a noun as specific or non-specific and can also indicate singular or plural. For example, *a* noisy dog (non-specific) versus *the* noisy dog next door (specific), or *the* noisy dogs (plural) are disturbing the neighbours.

Indefinite Article

*A* and *an* are indefinite articles because they refer to any non-specific person (*a* teacher), place (*a* house), or thing (*a* car). Indefinite articles can only be used for a singular, countable noun. *An* is used when the noun it is describing begins with a vowel or a vowel sound (eg. *an* elephant, *an* hour). *A* and *an* cannot be used with non-countable nouns (sugar, democracy, information, etc.), or plural nouns (tables, children, etc.).

Definite Article

The definite article, *the*, is the most common word in the English language. The use of *the* indicates a specific person (*the* cashier), place (*the* hospital), or thing (*the* computer). You can use the definite article with both countable and non-countable nouns when you are referring to a specific instance. For example, *the* water (non-countable), or *the* trees (countable).

How to Use Articles

A singular countable noun must always have an article (*a* or *the* window depending on whether we are referring to a window in general, or a specific window).

Articles are placed just before a noun or in front of any adjectives modifying a noun.

  I would like *a* sweater for my birthday. (general)
  I would like *the* blue, striped sweater from The Gap for my birthday. (specific)

Subsequent mentions of a noun must use *the*.

  *A* child (general) is riding a bicycle. *The* child (specific to the one we just mentioned) is wearing *a* helmet (general). *The* helmet is red (specific).

No Article Required

Languages, such as French or Spanish (unless referring to people from that country)

  *French* is a beautiful language. *The* French produce excellent wine.

Sports, like baseball (unless referring to the ball itself) or swimming

  *Baseball* is a fun game to play. *A* baseball is a good gift for a 12 year-old boy.

Subjects such as Biology or Math

  *Anatomy* is the study of living organ systems. *The* anatomy of the heart is fascinating.

Countries, Cities, and Streets

  *Halifax* is located on the Atlantic coast of Canada.

Mass nouns or general non-countable nouns (unless referring to specific cases)

  *Cows* (mass noun, no article) like grass (general noun, no article).
  *The* cows in Mr. Green’s field like *the* tall grass. (specific cows and specific grass).

Concepts such as Freedom, Ideas, or Research

  *Information* (concept in general) can be found on our website. *The information* (specific case) on your website is very useful.