

Articles: *A, An, and The*

DEFINITION: **Articles** signal that a noun is about to appear. Although there are specific rules to follow when using articles properly, it is important to note that there are many exceptions to each rule.

RULE: When choosing between *a* and *an*, *a* is used before a consonant sound, and *an* is used before a vowel sound.

EXAMPLES:

Before a Consonant Sound:

-*A banana*

-*A tree*

-*A happy child*

-*A red watch*

Before a Vowel Sound:

-*An eggplant*

-*An uncle*

-*An hour*

-*An honorable person*

***Note:** *An* may be used before words beginning with *h* when the *h* has a vowel sound, such as in *hour* or *honorable*.

Specific Identity

DEFINITION: A noun is said to have a **specific identity** when its identity is known to the reader.

The identity may be known to the reader for many reasons, including:

- The noun has been previously mentioned.
- A phrase or clause following the noun restricts its identity.
- A superlative such as *best* or *most intelligent* makes the noun's identity specific.
- The noun describes a unique person, place, or thing.
- The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear.

RULE: Use *a* or *an* with nouns whose specific identity is not known to the reader.

EXAMPLES:

-*Mary Beth arrived in **a** limousine.*

(The reader does not know which specific limousine she arrived in, just that she arrived in one.)

-*We are looking for **an** apartment close to the lake.*

(The subject [*we*] is looking for any apartment close to the lake, not a specific one.)

RULE: Use *the* with most nouns whose specific identity is known to the reader.

EXAMPLES:

-*Bob warned me that **the** gun on top of **the** shelf in our living room was loaded.*

(The phrase *on top of the shelf in our living room* indicates which particular gun is referred to, just as the phrase *in our living room* indicates which particular shelf is being referred to.)

-*Our petite daughter dated **the** tallest boy in her class.*

(The word *tallest* restricts the identity of the noun *boy* so that it can only refer to one specific boy in the class.)

-*During an eclipse, one should not look directly at **the** sun.*

(There is only one sun in our solar system, so its identity is clear.)

-*Please don't slam **the** door when you leave.*

(Both the speaker and the listener know which door is being referred to.)

Noncount Nouns

DEFINITION: A **noncount noun** refers to an entity or abstract concept that cannot be counted. Noncount nouns do not have plural forms and should not be used with words or numbers describing plurality.

RULE: Do not use *a*, or *an* with noncount nouns.

EXAMPLES

-We need some information about rain forests. (Information is a noncount noun.)

-Do you have much money with you? (Money is a noncount noun.)

RULE: Do not use *the* with plural or noncount nouns meaning "all" or "in general"

EXAMPLES

*-Fountains are an expensive element of landscape design. (In this sentence, the plural noun *fountains* means all fountains, not a specific type of fountain.)*

*-In some parts of the world, rice is preferred to all other grains. (In this sentence, *rice* is a noncount noun referring to rice in general.)*

***Note:** Some noncount nouns may also be used as count nouns, especially in informal English:
Bill loves chocolate; Bill offered me a chocolate. I'll have coffee; I'll have a coffee.

A HELPFUL CHART OF COMMONLY USED NONCOUNT NOUNS:

Food and Drink:

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

Nonfood Substances

Air, cement, coal, dirt, gasoline, gold, paper, petroleum, plastic, rain, silver, snow, soap, steel, wood, wool

Abstract Nouns

Advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, employment, fun, happiness, health, honesty, information, intelligence, knowledge, love, poverty, satisfaction, truth, wealth

Other

Biology (and other areas of study), clothing, equipment, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, lumber, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, traffic, transportation, violence, weather, work.

***Note:** This is by no means a comprehensive list of noncount nouns, just those commonly used

Geographic Names

***Note:** It is important to realize that there are many exceptions to the following rules concerning geographic names. If unsure, ask a native speaker to clarify the appropriate article usage.

RULE: Do not use *the* with singular proper nouns.

EXAMPLES:

-*Spring Street*

-*Lake Huron*

RULE: Use *the* with plural proper nouns.

EXAMPLES:

-*the Bahamas*

-*the Finger Lakes*

A HELPFUL CHART:

When to omit *the*:

-streets, squares, parks	<i>Ivy Street, Union Square, Denali National Park</i>
-cities, states, counties	<i>Miami, Idaho, Bee County</i>
-most countries	<i>Italy, Nigeria, China</i>
-bays, single lakes	<i>Tampa Bay, Lake Geneva</i>
-single mountains, islands	<i>Mount Everest, Crete</i>

When to use *the*:

-united countries	<i>the United States, the Republic of China</i>
-large regions, deserts	<i>the East Coast, the Sahara</i>
-peninsulas	<i>the Iberian Peninsula</i>
-oceans, seas, gulfs	<i>the Pacific, the Dead Sea, the Persian Gulf</i>
-canals and rivers	<i>the Panama Canal, the Amazon</i>
-mountain ranges	<i>the Rocky Mountains, the Alps</i>
-group of islands	<i>the Solomon Islands</i>

Source: D. Hacker, *A Writer's Reference* (5th Ed.). 2003: 209-214.