

Article Rules

The three articles in English are a, an, and the.

- ✓ The articles “a” and “an” are *indefinite articles*. The article “the” is known as the *definite article*.

Usage

- ✓ There are two types of nouns: countable and non-countable.

Countable nouns are nouns that can have a number in front of them. When there is only one of that noun, it is singular. When there is more than one, it is plural.

Example: one shoe (singular) two shoes (plural)

Non-countable nouns are nouns that have no plural form. We cannot put a number in front of them.

Examples: rice, milk, coffee, advice, time, corn, wheat, and information.

- ✓ “a” is used before the first mention of a singular countable noun that begins with a consonant sound.

Example: A car is necessary if you live in New Jersey.
My neighbor has a dog and a cat.

- ✓ “an” is used if the singular countable noun begins with a vowel sound. If there are adjectives between the indefinite article and the noun, use the sound of the adjective nearest the article to determine whether “a” or “an” should be used. Most words that begin with a vowel sound also begin with a vowel letter. However, there are some exceptions, and those exceptions mostly occur with words that begin with “h” or “u”.

Examples: Bob had *an egg* for breakfast.

Patricia wrote *an opera*.

John dreams of becoming *an umpire* someday.

I’d like to go to *a university*. *

Maria would like to learn how to fly *a helicopter*.

He kept us waiting for over *an hour*. *

Jill sold *a blue umbrella* to Tom. *

Roger bought *an ugly dog*.*

- “University” begins with a vowel, but the first sound is pronounced /j/ as in “you”, which is a consonant sound, so “a” is used.
- “Hour” begins with a consonant, but the “h” is silent. The first sound that is pronounced is a vowel, so “an” is used.
- “Umbrella” begins with a vowel sound, but the adjective “blue” appears between “umbrella” and the indefinite article, and “blue” begins with a consonant sound. For that reason, “a” is used.
- “Dog” begins with a consonant sound, but the adjective “ugly” appears between “dog” and the indefinite article, and “ugly” begins with a vowel sound. Therefore, “an” is used.

- ✓ **The plural of “a” and “an” is “some” for an affirmative statement, and “any” for a negative statement or question.**

Examples: I have *some pens* in my purse.

Bob doesn't have *any pictures* on his desk.

Do you have *any green socks*?

- ✓ **“a” is used with the words few or little when they express a positive meaning.**

Example: I have *a few minutes*. (I have some time.)

John put *a little bit* of sugar in his coffee.

(John put a small amount of sugar in his coffee.)

In contrast, if the meaning is negative, don't use “a”.

Example 1: Harriet has *little patience* for people who are late.

(She *doesn't* have much patience for people who are late.)

Example 2: George has *few friends*.

(George *doesn't* have many friends.)

- ✓ **If the noun is plural and countable, and it is being mentioned in general, do not use an article.**

Example: *Dogs* can make good pets. (In general, dogs make good pets.)

Flowers make Bob sneeze. (In general, flowers make Bob sneeze.)

- ✓ **“the” is used for the second mention of countable and non-countable nouns.**

Example: My neighbor has a dog and a cat. *The dog* is a golden retriever, and *the cat* is a Siamese.

Example: We had corn and rice for dinner last night. *The rice* was delicious, but *the corn* was overcooked.

Example: John has two dogs. *The dogs* are very friendly.

- ✓ **“the” is used if there is only one of something.**

Example: *The sun* is 93 million miles from the Earth. (There is only one sun.)

- ✓ **“the” is used if the speaker and the listener are thinking of the same person or thing.**

May I please speak to *the secretary*? (We are thinking of the same secretary.)

Could you close *the door*? (We are thinking of the same door.)

- ✓ **“the” is used in front of a noun if words in the sentence make the noun specific.**

Example: *The people* who finished their income taxes early are very happy.

(We are thinking of specific people, and they are they ones who finished their income taxes early.)

Non-specific example: I want *a car* that has a sunroof.

(It doesn't matter which car I get as long as it has a sunroof.)

✓ **“the” is used with superlative adjectives.**

Main Street is the busiest road in the city.

✓ **“the” is used with shared things.**

the beach the hospital

✓ **“the” is used with the following types of nouns:**

1. The whole family (the Smiths) (This means Mr. and Mrs. Smith, as well as any children they may have.)
2. Places with collective or plural names (the United States, the Philippines)
3. Place names that look like this: the ____ of ____ (the Statue of Liberty, the Republic of China, the University of Chicago)
4. Names of mountain ranges, deserts, oceans, seas, rivers, and collectives of islands, lakes, and rivers. (the Sahara Desert, the Atlantic Ocean, the Bering Sea, the Hudson River, the Hawaiian islands)
5. Names of well-known buildings (the Empire State Building), ships (the Titanic), Zoos (the Bronx zoo)
6. Sections of a country or city (the Upper East Side, the Southwest)
7. The ____ language (the Spanish language, the Russian language)
8. Musical instruments (unless a generalization is being made)
(the flute, the drums, the piano)

Generalization: A piano has eighty-eight keys. (All pianos have eighty-eight keys.)

Specific situation: Do you play the piano?

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Some Grammatical Information taken from:

Azar, Betty Schramper. Fundamentals of English Grammar. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1992.

Elbaum, Sandra N. Grammar in Context: Book One. Harper, 1986.

Hayes, Christopher G. English at Hand. Marlton: Townsend, 1996.