The words *a*, *an*, and *the* are called articles. In English, readers usually expect to see one of those words before a noun (person, place, or thing).

**Definite article: the**

Writers use *the* when they are talking about a specific noun, called a *definite noun*. Here, the word *the* tells us that the writer is talking about a specific store.

✓ the store

*The* can be used with both singular and plural nouns.

✓ the stores

**Indefinite articles: a, an**

Writers use *a* and *an* when they are talking about a noun that is *not* specific (an *indefinite noun*).

Use *a* for nouns that begin with a consonant.

Here, the word *a* tells us that the writer could be talking about *any* store.

✓ a store

Use *an* for nouns that begin with a vowel.

✓ an apple

Also use *an* for nouns that have a descriptive word in front of them if that word begins with a vowel.

✓ an electronics store

*A* and *an* have the same meaning as the number *one*. Because of this, they are only used for singular nouns, not plural.

✗ a stores

✗ an apples
Instead of using a or an for plural indefinite nouns, a writer uses no article at all. Here, the writer could be talking about any group of stores or apples.

- stores
- apples

Some nouns stand for things that can’t be counted, so it would be incorrect to use a or and for those nouns.

- a happiness [X]
- an air [X]

For nouns that cannot be counted, it is okay to use no article at all. Sometimes it is also okay to use the.

- happiness [✓]  the happiness [✓]
- air [✓]  the air [✓]

When a writer does not make a noun plural or give it an article, this creates a problem for the reader.

- Max had idea [X]

Does the writer mean that Max had one idea or more than one? It is impossible to know. Instead, the sentence should look like one of these:

- Max had an idea [✓]
- Max had the idea [✓]
- Max had ideas [✓]

Some proper nouns do not need articles at all.

- Huntsville, TX [✓]
- Sam Houston State University [✓]

These nouns do not need articles because there is only one of them in the whole world.

Note: Writers say The United States instead of just United States because here, the word The is not just an article. It is part of the name of the country.