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

### Which Article to Use

**Definite article: the**

Writers use *the* when they are talking about a specific noun, called a *definite noun*.

![Checkmark symbol]

*the store*

Here, the word *the* tells us that the writer is talking about a specific store.

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

![Checkmark symbol]

*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.

![Checkmark symbol]

*a store*

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

Use *an* for nouns or noun phrases that begin with a vowel or vowel sound.

![Checkmark symbol]

*an apple*  

*an electronics store*

*A* and *an* are only used for singular nouns, not plural.

![Checkmark symbol]  ![Cross symbol]

*a stores*  

*an apples*

Instead of using *a* or *an* for plural indefinite nouns, a writer would use no article at all.

![Checkmark symbol]  

*stores*  

*apples*

Here, the writer could be talking about *any* group of stores or apples.
The Importance of Articles

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

\[\times\] Max had idea.

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:

\[\checkmark\] Max had the idea.  \[\checkmark\] Max had an idea.  \[\checkmark\] Max had ideas.

Singular Nouns that Never Need Articles

Some proper nouns do not need articles at all.

\[\checkmark\] Huntsville, TX  \[\checkmark\] Sam Houston State University  \[\checkmark\] President Bob

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.