



Articles / Noun Markers / Determiners

For the non-English speakers, articles may represent a real challenge, as there is not a rule to cover every possible usage. To this adds the fact that in those speakers' native language there is no article, therefore they will have to learn the concept and apply it intuitively, at least in the initial phase of their learning process. The mastering of articles comes with time and reading, writing, and speaking can help the English language learner tremendously.

The primary articles in English are "a," "an," and "the." They function as adjectives and have special rules dictating their use.

1. **The** is a "definite" article, modifying a particular person, animal, place, or thing.
2. **A** and **an** are used before words that indicate a more general item in a category. **A** is used when the noun following it starts with a consonant sound. The long sound of *u* and the pronounced *h* are considered consonant sounds. (ex: a university, a hat) **An** is used when the following word begins with a vowel sound. The silent *h* and short *u* are considered vowel sounds. (ex. an uncle, an hour, an elf)

Compare the following examples:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Please hand me <i>the</i> paper. | a certain paper |
| Please give me <i>a</i> paper | any paper |
| Hand me <i>an</i> encyclopedia | any of them |

Articles show whether the person, place, thing, animal, or idea is definite or indefinite; it also shows how many:

1. We saw a teacher and writer. [one person]
2. We saw a teacher and a writer. [two persons]

Use the definite article "the":

- With the names of certain countries, geographical locations, and plural mountains, lakes, and islands: the Far East, the United Kingdom, the Nile River, the Rocky Mountains.
 Proper nouns either use no article, or "the."
 Incorrect: He went on a safari in the Africa.
 Correct: He lives in the United States.
- With countable nouns: a/the book, a/the child, a/the desk, the children.
- To show that something or someone has already been spoken or written about or is known to the speaker or hearer.
 This is *the* paper you asked me to revise.
 Please give me *the* ticket.

- To show that something or someone is only one of its kind.
The moon will rise late tonight.
- To refer to parts of the body, parts of houses, and parts of machines.
We were gathered in the living room.
- To refer to all those of a stated kind.
All the children liked the performance.
- To refer to a species of animal or plant.
The lion is a feline.
- To show the relation between two things.
His car gets 30 miles to the gallon.
- To show the relation between amounts of things (comparative adjectives)
The sooner you come, the better.
- To compare using superlatives.
This is the best Writing Center I have ever seen.

Use the indefinite articles “a” or “an”:

- To refer to any one of a number of possible things.
He needs a pencil.
- To refer to one part of a larger quantity.
May I have a cup of coffee?
- To specify information associated with each item of a grouping.
The pens cost \$2 a piece.
- With someone’s name you have not met before.
A Mr. Stone asked to see you.
- To introduce a noun to the reader for the first time.
They heard a loud noise. The noise was coming from the basement.

Do not use the article with noncount nouns.

Noncount nouns do not form plurals and name things which cannot be counted directly:

- Groups of items: equipment, furniture, homework.
- Substances without a fixed shape: air, blood, coffee.
- Abstractions: advice, information, knowledge.
- Recreation: baseball, football, tennis.
- Fields of study: biology, history, economics.
- General activities in gerund (-ing) form: driving, writing, traveling.
- Natural phenomena: darkness, fog, sunshine.