

THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**
STATE UNIVERSITY

Articles in English

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*.

✓ 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.

✓ 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.

✓ 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.

✓ an apple ✓ an electronics store

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

✗ a stores ✗ an apples

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

✓ stores ✓ apples

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

Information on this handout adapted from:
English Grammar Drills by Mark Lester

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.

✗ 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:

✓ Max had the idea. ✓ Max had an idea. ✓ Max had ideas.

Singular Nouns that Never Need Articles

Some proper nouns do not need articles at all.

✓ Huntsville, TX ✓ Sam Houston State University ✓ 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.