



## Using Articles<sup>i</sup>

Use of the articles *a*, *an*, and *the* can depend on any of four paired noun qualities: countable vs. non-countable, definite vs. indefinite, first vs. subsequent mention, and general vs. specific:

### Countable vs. Non-countable

*A* and *an* are used if the noun can be counted.

- I ran into **a** post. (How many posts did you run into? Just one. Therefore, use *a*.)
- I ate **a** piece of cake. I saw **an** eagle.

*The* is used when the noun cannot be counted.

- I ran into **the** water. (How many waters did you run into? The question doesn't make any sense because water is non-countable. Therefore, use *the*.)
- I ate **the** rice. I saw **the** milk spill.

### Indefinite Articles: *a* and *an*

*A* and *an* signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to any member of a group. These indefinite articles are used with singular nouns when the noun is general; the corresponding indefinite quantity word *some* is used for plural general nouns. The rule is:

- *a* + a singular noun beginning with a consonant: *a boy*
- *an* + a singular noun beginning with a vowel: *an elephant*
- *some* + a plural noun: *some girls*

Note that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a profession, nationality, or religion.

- I am *a* teacher. Brian is *an* Irishman. Seiko is *a* practicing Buddhist.

### Definite Article: *the*

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is particular or specific.

*The* signals that the noun is definite; it refers to a particular member of a group. Compare the indefinite and definite articles in the following pairs:

- **A** dog (any dog). **The** dog (that specific dog)

*The* is used with both singular and plural nouns:

- **the** book, **the** cat
- **the** books, **the** cats

*The* is not used with non-countable nouns referring to something in a general sense:

- [no article] Coffee is a popular drink.
- [no article] Japanese was his native language.
- [no article] Intelligence is difficult to quantify.

*The* is used with non-countable nouns that are made more specific by a modifying phrase or clause:

- **The** coffee in my cup is too hot to drink.
- **The** Japanese he speaks is often heard in the countryside.
- **The** intelligence of animals is variable but undeniable.

*The* is also used when a noun refers to something unique:

- the White House; the theory of relativity; the 2016 federal budget





## Geographical Uses of *the*

DO NOT use *the* before:

- names of countries, except the Netherlands, the US, the Philippines (Italy, Mexico, Bolivia)
- names of cities, towns, or states (Seoul, Manitoba, Miami)
- names of streets (Washington Blvd., Main St.)
- names of lakes and bays, except with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes (Lake Louise, Lake Erie)
- names of mountains, except with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Rockies or unusual names like the Matterhorn (Mount Everest, Mount Fuji)
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands except with island chains like the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or the Canary Islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West)

DO use *the* before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas (the Nile, the Pacific, the Sea of Japan)
- points on the globe (the Equator, the North Pole)
- geographical areas (the Middle East, the West)
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula)

## First vs. Subsequent Mention

*A* or *an* is used to introduce a noun when it is mentioned for the first time in a piece of writing. *The* is used afterward each time you mention that same noun.

*An* awards ceremony at the Kremlin would not normally have attracted so much attention.

But when it was leaked that Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko would be presenting medals to three cosmonauts, interest in *the* ceremony intensified. (*Time*, Sept. 17, 1984).

Note: *There is* and *there are* can be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or essay.

## General vs. Specific

*A*, *an*, and *the* can all be used to indicate that a noun refers to the whole class to which individual countable nouns belong. This use of articles is called generic, from the Latin word meaning "class."

- **A** tiger is a dangerous animal. (any individual tiger)
- **The** tiger is a dangerous animal. (all tigers: tiger as a generic category)

The omission of articles also expresses a generic (or general) meaning:

- no article with a plural noun: Tigers are dangerous animals. (all tigers)
- no article with a non-countable noun: Anger is a destructive emotion. (any kind of anger)

## Omission of Articles

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities: Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian
- Names of sports: volleyball, hockey, baseball
- Names of academic subjects: mathematics, biology, history, computer science

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from the Purdue Online Writing Lab, "[Using Articles](https://www.purdue.edu/owl/writing_tips/using_articles.html)" at owl.purdue.edu. Find exercises to practice article usage at [www.norton.com/college/english/write/writesite/exercises/welcome.aspx](https://www.norton.com/college/english/write/writesite/exercises/welcome.aspx).

