



Articles

Articles are a type of adjective used before nouns. English has two articles, the definite article and the indefinite article. Article use poses a challenge for many writers, but it is important to understand how to make use of these important adjectives. This handout will cover the meaning and difference between the definite and indefinite article and outline some grammar guidelines to help you learn how to correctly use both in sentences. Guidelines will be accompanied by examples. You can also test your understanding of the definite/indefinite article distinction with a challenge exercise.

The Definite Article

English has only one definite article; the English definite article is “**the**”. Use the definite article (**the**) when a noun has a unique referent (i.e., when the noun refers to something unique or specific).

The following list provides instances (with examples) where you would use the definite article. The definite article should be used when the noun it refers to:

- is the only one
Examples: the best solution, the present location, the future, the 1940s, the third stage, the next step, the Bow River
- is the only one in a given environment
Examples: the dog, the premier, the interest rate, the budget
- is the only one being indicated
Examples: pointing to the window, working with the student
- has been mentioned previously
Examples: I went to a movie. The movie I saw...
- represents an entire type or category of thing
Examples: the polar bear, the Boeing 787
- refers to an invention
Examples: The iPhone revolutionized
- is defined (made specific) by a phrase following it
Examples: the concepts discussed last class, the writing on the wall, the girl with the bewildered look

Note: With a specific noun, you can also use the possessive form and demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those) instead of the definite article.

Examples of possessives: John's job, your dog, my courses, their reasons

Examples of demonstratives: this job, that dog, those courses, these reasons

The Indefinite Article

In English the indefinite article is **a** or **an**. Use the indefinite article (**a/an**) when a noun does not have a unique referent (i.e., when the noun refers to any member of a group or category). Whether to use **a** or **an** as the indefinite article depends on the sound that the word after the article begins with. If the word following the article begins with a consonant sound, use **a**. If the word after the article begins with a vowel sound, use **an**.

Note: Some words begin with vowels that sound like consonants (e.g. university starts with "u" that sounds like "yoo-ni-ver-sity"). In these cases, use the indefinite article **a**. Some words begin with silent consonants which make them begin with vowel sounds (e.g. hour starts with a silent "h" that sounds like "ow-er"), in these cases, use the indefinite article **an**.

The following list provides instances (with examples) where you would use the indefinite article. The indefinite article should be used when the noun it refers to does not have a unique referent, is countable and singular.

Examples:

Example 1: I saw a dog in the park.

In this example, the indefinite article is used because we don't know which specific dog was seen.

Example 2: I want an apple for my snack.

In this example, the indefinite article is used because the statement refers to any apple rather than a specific apple.

Example 3: Can someone call a doctor?

In this example, the indefinite article is used because the speaker is referring to any doctor rather than a particular doctor.

Countable and Uncountable Nouns

Sometimes which article to use with a noun, and even whether you should use an article at all, is impacted by whether the noun is countable or uncountable.

Countable nouns

A noun is countable if you can attach a number to it (e.g., two jobs, three courses, one apple). Countable nouns can be paired with definite articles, indefinite articles, or no article depending on the circumstance. Use the definite article with countable nouns if the noun refers to something specific or unique (refer to examples in the definite article section above). Do not use an article if the noun has a number attached or is plural by itself (e.g., There are seven spaces in the class. Glaciers flow under the pressure of their own mass.).

Uncountable nouns

A noun is uncountable if you cannot attach a number to it. An uncountable noun is likely one of the following:

- an abstraction
Examples: honesty, health, intelligence, knowledge, poverty
- an area of study or activity
Examples: agriculture, business, cooking, economics, hockey
- a substance that can be counted only by unit of measure or mass
Examples: water, milk, oil, dirt, flour
- a collection of things
Examples: clothing, furniture, hardware, information, luggage, money
- a natural or physical phenomenon
Examples: daylight, cold, gravity, electricity
- Most gerunds (nouns ending with ‘-ing’)
Examples: I like swimming, painting is fun

Use the definite article with uncountable nouns if the noun refers to something specific or unique (refer to examples in the definite article section above). Do not use an article if the noun refers to a thing or activity in general (e.g. Lacrosse is Canada’s national sport. Work experience is important. I want to study history.)

Grammar guideline:

In addition to the grammar rules discussed above, another instance when you should not use an article before a noun is with nouns that refer to all types or concepts in general.

Examples:

- Crime doesn't pay.
 - In this example, no article is used before the noun (crime) because the sentence is referring to crime as a general concept.
- The crime was reported to police.
 - In this example, the definite article is used before the noun (crime) because the sentence is referring to a specific crime.

A note on tricky nouns: Some nouns can be either countable or uncountable, depending on whether they are referring to something specific (countable) or general (uncountable).

Examples:

“The house had three televisions.” **vs.** “I like to watch television.”

“She has been a consultant for over 10 businesses.” **vs.** “She works in business.”

Aids for Article Usage

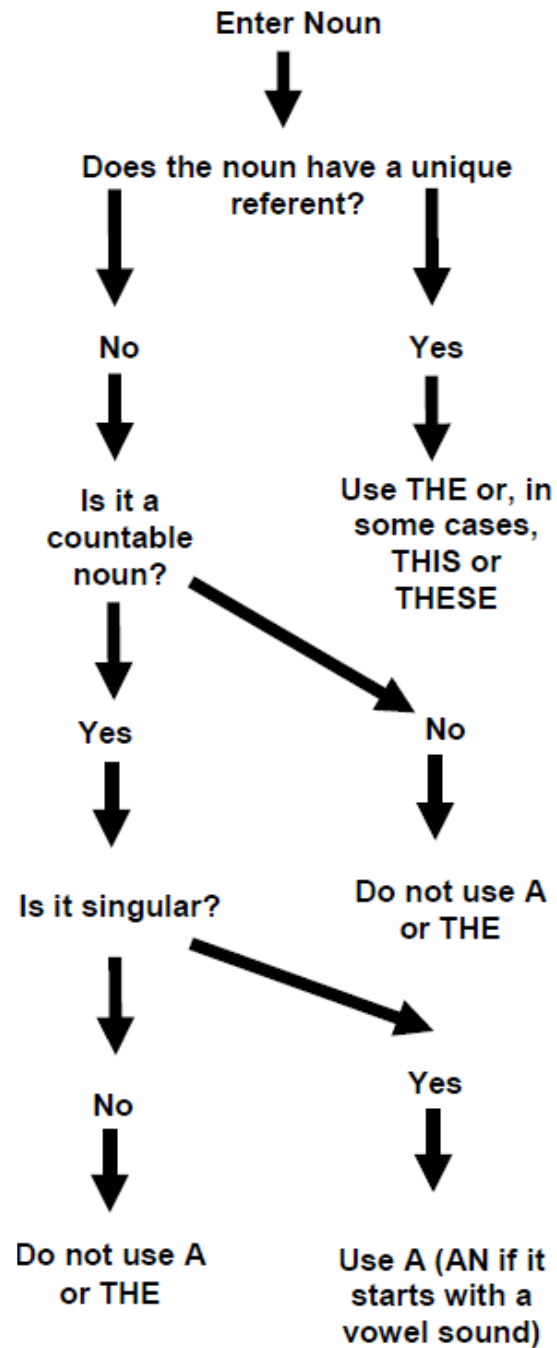
The following section provides several aids can help you determine if you should use the definite or indefinite article. The aids include a flowchart, a written decision guide, and an article usage chart. Each aid contains the same essential information and incorporates the guidelines provided in the handout. Use whichever aids you find most helpful.

Article Usage Chart

Noun Condition(s)	Article Used	Examples
Unique/specific noun, singular	Definite article	the moon, the teacher, the cat
Unique/specific noun, plural	Definite article	the planets, the students, the mice
Countable, singular, not specific	Indefinite article	a dog, an apple
Countable, plural, not specific	No article	dogs are nice, apples are tasty
Uncountable, specific	Definite Article	the water is cold, the work is tiring
Uncountable, not specific	No article	Water is wet, work is necessary, swimming is fun

Flow Chart

This flowchart is adapted from Figure 18-2 of Huckin, T.N. & Olsen, L.A. (1983) *English for science and technology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 380.



Article Usage Decision Guide

For the noun in question ask the following questions:

Question 1: Does the noun have a unique referent (i.e. is it specific)?

If yes: use the definite article (the). **Note:** Demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those) can also be used in some instances.

If no: go to Question 2.

Question 2: Is the noun countable?

If yes: go to Question 3.

If no: do not use an article.

Question 3: Is the noun singular?

If yes: use the indefinite article (a, an)

If no: do not use an article.

Challenge Exercise

Read the following paragraph. Throughout the paragraph you will find numbers where an article might be needed. In each instance, determine whether to use **the**, **a**, **an**, or **no article**. The Challenge Exercise Key is found on the next page.

In **(1)** active city like New York, finding **(2)** occupation can be quite challenging. However, with determination and **(3)** a bit of luck, one can secure employment in various fields. One example is **(4)** case of Sarah, **(5)** recent college graduate with **(6)** passion for journalism. After months of searching, she finally landed **(7)** job at **(8)** prestigious New York Times. **(9)** excitement of working for such **(10)** renowned publication was palpable as she walked into **(11)** office on her first day. As she delved into her assignments, Sarah quickly realized that journalism was not just **(12)** job but **(13)** calling. With **(14)** articles she wrote, she aimed to shed light on important issues and inspire change. Through **(15)** hard work and **(16)** dedication, Sarah became known as one of **(17)** **the** most promising young journalists in **(18)** city.

Challenge Exercise Key

This key provides the paragraph with the correct article for each numbered noun.

In **(1) an** active city like New York, finding **(2) an** occupation can be quite challenging. However, with determination and **(3) a** bit of luck, one can secure employment in various fields. One example is **(4) the** case of Sarah, **(5) a** recent college graduate with **(6) a** passion for journalism. After months of searching, she finally landed **(7) a** job at **(8) the** prestigious New York Times. **(9) The** excitement of working for such **a (10)** renowned publication was palpable as she walked into **(11) the** office on her first day. As she delved into her assignments, Sarah quickly realized that journalism was not just **(12) a** job but **(13) a** calling. With **(14) the** articles she wrote, she aimed to shed light on important issues and inspire change. Through **(15) (no article)** hard work and **(16) (no article)** dedication, Sarah became known as one of **(17) the** most promising young journalists in **(18) the** city.