

Using Articles (a, an, the)

There are only two types of articles: the **indefinite articles** “a” and “an,” and the **definite article** “the,” yet article usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for non-native writers to master. Choosing which type to use is challenging because article rules are complex, and depends on information that sometimes cannot be found within the sentence itself, but in the context of the sentence in the piece you are writing.

The Definite Article

The definite article “the” is used when both the writer and the reader know the specific person, place, or thing(s) being referred to. When using the definite article, the context of the sentence in question will contain information already shared in an earlier part of the piece. For example, when we read the sentence, “I really enjoyed the book,” we can infer that the specific details of the book have already been mentioned in a previous sentence.

Indefinite Articles: “A” and “An”

Indefinite articles are used when referring to a non-specific person, place or thing that can be counted. These articles are used when the reader does not know the specific details of the noun being discussed in the sentence. For example, if a sentence reads “I’d like to read a book this afternoon,” we can infer that the writer is referring to any book, not a specific book. If the noun in the sentence is non-specific and countable, we use *a* if the word begins with a consonant, and *an* if the word begins with a vowel.

No Article Required: Proper Nouns, Plural Nouns, and Non-Count Nouns.

Proper nouns name specific people, places, or things, and these nouns are capitalized. These nouns do not take articles, because of their level of specificity. Examples of proper nouns include people’s names, names of cities and states, and names of companies.

Plural nouns very often do not require an article, for example if you are writing about birds, it is acceptable to simply write “I have always enjoyed the sound of birds chirping.” (However, if you had discussed a specific group of birds earlier in the piece, you would use the definite article “the” to convey to your readers that these were the same birds. For example, “A family of bluebirds lived outside my window. The birds chirped happily that morning.”)

Non-count nouns are words that describe substances or concepts that cannot be divided into separate pieces or counted individually. Examples include words like; water, information, honesty, power. All of these words can not be quantified, and thus do not require an article. To better understand this concept, consider the word dollar and the word money. While both describe the same thing, we could write “I wanted a dollar” but not “I wanted a money,” because only dollars can be counted individually.

