

Articles

WHAT IS AN ARTICLE?

An article has the same basic function as an adjective in that it is used to describe a noun. There are two different articles in the English language: **the** and **a/an**. **The** is used to describe a specific noun, whereas **a/an** is used to describe a more general noun. For this reason, **the** is also referred to as a **definite article**, and **a/an** is referred to as an **indefinite article**.

Definite Article: "the"

The definite article, **the**, is used before both singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific.

The cat is black and white.

I would love to meet **the** author of my favorite book.

Have you seen **the** lions that are living at the zoo?

Definite Article Usage

The names of geographical places are specific nouns and, therefore, may require definite articles. **Do use "the"** before the following specific nouns:

- Names of rivers, oceans, and seas
the Mississippi River, *the* Navesink River
the Atlantic Ocean, *the* Dead Sea
- Geographical areas
the Mediterranean, *the* Northern Hemisphere, *the* South
- Deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas
the Gobi Desert, *the* Amazon
the Gulf of Mexico, *the* Baja Peninsula
- Groups of lakes, mountain ranges, and chains of islands
the Great Lakes, *the* Andes, *the* Rocky Mountains
the Canary Islands, *the* Virgin Islands, *the* Bahamas

However, **no article is necessary** before the following specific nouns:

- Singular names of countries or territories
Canada, Spain, Mexico, Puerto Rico
- Names of cities, towns or states
New York City, West Long Branch, New Jersey

No article is necessary before the following specific nouns:

- Names of streets
35th Street, Park Place, Broadway
- Names of lakes and bays
Lake Winnepesaukee, Lake George, Barnegat Bay
- Names of mountains
Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount St. Helens
- Names of continents
Africa, Australia, North America
- Names of islands
Fiji, Easter Island, Hawaii
- Names of languages
Spanish, English, Russian
- Names of sports
badminton, bowling, miniature golf
- Names of academic subjects
psychology, criminal justice, anthropology

Indefinite Articles: "a/an"

A and **an** are indefinite articles that identify nouns; however, the nouns are not specific. This means that **a** and **an** can refer to any member of a group.

Jamie was hoping to apply to **an** internship next semester.

(The use of the indefinite article "an" in this sentence implies that Jamie was hoping to apply to any internship next semester, not a specific internship.)

Jamie was hoping to apply to **the** internship at the law firm next semester. (The use of the definite article "the" in this sentence implies that Jamie was hoping to apply to a specific internship next semester: not just any internship, but the one at the law firm.)

My sister needs to buy **a** new car since she totaled hers.

(The use of the indefinite article "a" in this sentence implies that my sister needs to buy any car she can find, not a specific one.)

My sister needs to buy **the** car she saw in the paper since she totaled hers. (The use of the definite article "the" in this sentence implies that my sister needs to buy a specific car: not just any car, but the one she saw in the paper.)

Indefinite Article Usage

Note: **A** and **an** depend on the sound that follows it. If the sound preceding the article is a *vowel* sound, use **an**. If the sound preceding the article is a *consonant* sound, use **a**.

- **an** orange
- **an** entrée
- **a** dog
- **a** meal

Note: Sometimes a vowel at the beginning of a word may sound like a consonant.

- **a** user, **a** university, **a** uniform

With these words, the vowel “u” takes on the sound of “you,” requiring the indefinite article “a.” However, other words beginning with the same letter may not have a consonant sound and, therefore, require the indefinite article “an.” For example:

- **an** usher, **an** umbrella

Note: Sometimes a consonant at the beginning of a word may be silent.

- **an** honor, **an** hour

With these words, the consonant “h” is silent, requiring the indefinite article “an.” However, other words beginning with the same letter may not be silent and, therefore, require the indefinite article “a.” For example:

- **a** hero, **a** horror

Note: When the noun is modified by an adjective, **a** or **an** is used according to the word closest to it.

- **an** important meeting
- **a** school play