

Grammar & ESL: Articles—*a, an, the*

The articles **a**, **an**, and **the** help your readers understand whether you're using a noun in an indefinite (general) or definite (specific) way.

Is the noun general? If the noun is general, use “*a*” or “*an*.”

- **A** and **an** are indefinite articles and are used to indicate a single item.
 - Take **a** pencil. (Take **one** pencil.)
 - I won **a** hundred dollars. (I won **one** hundred dollars.)
- Do not use **a** or **an** with a plural noun.
 - **Incorrect:** “They talked about a good restaurants.”
 - **Correct, Unspecific reference:** “They talked about a good restaurant to visit.”
 - **Correct, Specific reference:** “The talked about the good Italian restaurant on Main Street.”
- Use **a** as an unspecific reference **before a consonant**.
 - He likes to read **a** book. (She likes to read any book, **not** a specific one.)
 - That was **a** funny story. (That was **one of many** funny stories.)
- Use **a** when the word following it starts with a consonant sound.
 - **a** book, **a** hospital, **a** leg, **a** one-inch pipe, **a** youth
- Use **an** as an unspecific reference **before a vowel sound (a, e, i, o, u)**.
 - **an** apple, **an** opera, **an** eagle, **an** idea, **an** SOS (the **s** here is an **es** sound)
- Words that begin with **u** or **h** can have either a vowel or a consonant sound. Make the choice based on the sound of the first word after the article, even if that word is not the noun.
 - **a** union, **a** uniform (use **a** when the **u** sounds like the **y** in **you**)
 - **an** unbelievable event, **an** umbrella, **a** unique umbrella
 - **an** honor, **an** hour, **an** honest person
 - **a** hotel, **a** history book, **a** historian
 - **an** historian, **an** historic event (**NOTE:** words like historic can take either **a** or **an**)

Is the noun specific? If the noun is specific, use “*the*.”

- Use **the** as a specific reference to a common noun or something that is one of a kind.
 - Give me **the** book on **the** table. (identifies a specific book)
 - **The** sun rose at seven o'clock. (identifies something that is one of a kind)
- Use **a** or **an** to introduce a noun the first time it is mentioned, and then **the** is used afterwards whenever the noun is mentioned.
 - I bought **a** sandwich for lunch. I shared **the** sandwich with my friend.

Most proper nouns do not use an article. However, some do.

- A proper noun names unique person, place, or thing (New York City, Walt Disney, The United States of America)
 - **Correct:** “I went to New York City.”
 - **Incorrect:** “I went to the New York City.”
- An exception is the proper nouns with “of” as part of the name:
 - **the** Fourth **of** July
 - **the** University **of** Virginia
 - **the** United States **of** America
 - **the** President **of** Mexico
 - **the** Statue **of** Liberty
- Plural proper nouns use **the**:
 - **the** Chicago Bulls
 - **the** Johnsons
 - **the** Blue Ridge Mountains
- A proper noun that names a group (a collective noun) also uses **the**:
 - **the** Commonwealth of Virginia
 - **the** United Arab Emirates
 - **the** Society of Friends
- Some geographical features use **the**:
 - **the** Gobi Desert
 - **the** Atlantic Ocean
 - **the** Pyramids
 - **the** Amazon
- But other geographical features do not use **the**:
 - Lake Superior
 - Albemarle County
 - Route 29
 - Mount Vesuvius

When trying to decide whether to use an article, ask for help if you need it. Every time you learn a new use of an article, write it down.
