Grammar & ESL: Articles—\textit{a, an, the}

The articles \textit{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 “\textit{a}” or “\textit{an}.”

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

Is the noun specific? If the noun is specific, use “\textit{the}.”

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

Adapted from the CCNY Writing Center@The Samuel Rudin Academic Resource Center