Proper nouns do not take an article.
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.
  • “I’m going to the Museum of Modern Art.”
  • “I live in the United States of America.”

Common nouns often take an article.
A common noun names an unspecific person, place of thing. (city, man, country)
Is the noun specific? If the noun is specific, use “the.”
  • “I drive the blue car parked beside the green house.”
  • “I want to find the person to whom this cell phone belongs.”
  • “The dog with the red collar is mine.”
  • “I ate the apple that was on the table”

Is the noun general? If the noun is general, use “a” or “an.”
  • “I drive a blue car. I parked beside a house.”
  • “I want to give this cell phone to someone.” (Incorrect: “I want to give this cell phone to a someone.”)
  • “A dog with a red collar is barking.”
  • “I ate an apple.”

Rules for a, an, the

Use the – as a specific reference to a common noun
  • “The neighbor’s dog ate the red gardenias.”

Use a – as an unspecific reference before a consonant
  • “A bird, a house, a poem”

Use an – as an unspecific reference before a vowel sound (a, e, i, o, u)
  • “An apple, An egg, An iguana, etc.”

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.”