

Overview

Articles are words that modify (come before) nouns. English uses two articles:

1. the
2. a/an

Articles can be confusing, but with a few rules, they can be used effectively in academic writing. This brochure covers the basics, but keep in mind that exceptions exist for most rules.

Helpful terms to understand:

- *Noun*: a person, place, or thing. This includes abstract things like emotions, ideas, and experiences.
- *Specific noun*: has a distinct or unique identity
- *Non-specific noun*: does not have a distinct or unique identity
- *Countable noun*: can be counted with numbers
- *Uncountable noun*: cannot be counted with numbers

Uncountable	Countable
Homework	Assignment
Sadness	Tears
Snow	Inches of snow
Research	Sources

Omission of Articles

Some nouns don't take either article. Here are some common types:

- **Names of languages and nationalities**: Arabic, Hmong, Russian
- **Names of sports**: baseball, hockey, football
- **Names of academic subjects**: English, math, science

It is also common to omit an article when referring to uncountable nouns:

- "Furniture can be expensive."
- "I need more water!"

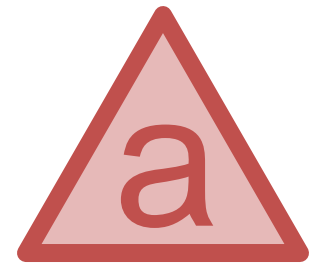
Newness

Sometimes, the same noun can use both "a/an" and "the." Typically, "a/an" is used when the noun is first introduced, and "the" is used afterwards:

- "I went to a concert last week. It was my favorite band, and I had waited 3 years for them to visit my city. The concert was well worth the wait!"

Adapted from the Purdue OWL website:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/using_articles.html

Articles



A/An

- Used with non-specific nouns
- Always singular
- Refers to any member of a group
- AKA the indefinite article

Examples:

- “I want to watch a movie.”
↳ This refers to any movie.
- “I took an elevator up.”
↳ This refers to a single, non-specific thing. It could be one of any number of elevators.

“A/an” can only be used with singular countable nouns:

- “She took a plane to Egypt.”
- “He looked for an open seat.”

TIP: When choosing between “a” and “an,” look at the word after the article; what letter or sound does it start with?

Starts with...	Example	Use
Consonant	A pen	a
Consonant sound*	A unit	a
Vowel	An uncle	an
Vowel sound*	An hour	an

*“Unit” starts with a “y” sound, and “hour” starts with an “o” sound.

The

- Used with specific nouns
- Can be singular or plural
- Refers to a particular member of a group
- AKA the definite article

Examples:

- “The movie was confusing.”
↳ This refers to one specific movie with the distinct quality of being confusing.
- “It was crowded in the elevator.”
↳ This refers to one specific elevator with the distinct quality of being crowded.

“The” can be used for both countable and uncountable nouns:

- “The rice is cooked.” (uncountable)
- “The bowls of rice are on the table.” (countable)

Exception:

“The” can also be used to reference a whole category:

- The cheetah is the fastest land animal.
- The smart phone has transformed global communication.

Geographical Use of The

YES:

- **Names of rivers, oceans, and seas:** the Mississippi, the Atlantic, the Red Sea
- **Points on the globe:** the Equator, the North Pole
- **Geographical areas:** the Middle East, the Boundary Waters
- **Deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas:** the Sahara, the Amazon rainforest, the Gulf of Mexico, the Arabian peninsula

NO:

- **Most countries:** Ethiopia, Laos, Mexico; however, there are exceptions like the United States and the Philippines
- **Cities, towns, and states:** Minneapolis, Cambridge, Minnesota
- **Streets:** Mississippi Boulevard, Spirit River Drive, Main Street
- **Lakes and bays:** Lake Minnetonka, Bde Maka Ska; the exception is a group of lakes like the Great Lakes
- **Mountains:** Mount Everest, Denali, Mount Fuji; the exception is a group of mountains like the Rockies
- **Continents:** North America, Africa, Asia
- **Islands:** Bali, Maui, Key West; the exception is island chains like the Canary Islands