

THE USE OF ARTICLES WITH COMMON NOUNS

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What is an article?

An article is sort of like an adjective: it modifies a noun. The articles in English are **the** (definite) and **a/an** (indefinite). Definite articles refer to a specific or particular noun, while indefinite articles refer to general singular nouns.

Why are articles important?

Articles specify nouns. Your choice of article can change the meaning of a sentence, such as the following:

- Indefinite: “I want to talk about a book” means you want to have a literary discussion about any book
- Definite: “I want to talk about the book” would refer to a specific book (that your audience would recognize)
- No article (and plural noun): “I want to talk about books” would be a discussion about books in general, such as bindings or the use of e-readers vs. paper books.

Using “a/an”

How to know when you want to use an indefinite article

You use indefinite articles when referring to general nouns. This might be because you don’t care to specify, or perhaps don’t have the knowledge to do so:

- If you walk into an emergency room and say “I need **a** doctor!”, you don’t care *which* doctor comes to your aid; you need *any* doctor.
- “I’m going to adopt **a** kitten for my birthday.” Here, there is a specific kitten that will be coming home with you, but you haven’t chosen it yet – so you don’t have the knowledge to specify which kitten you will adopt.
- “I saw **an** owl outside my house last night.” There are a lot of owls in the world; you saw one, but it wasn’t a specific one.

You also use an indefinite article to indicate membership in a group or category:

- “I am a writer.” I am a member of a large group made up of people who write. (Note: this does not indicate professional organizations, but rather a category.)
- “She is a Buddhist.” She is a member of a religion.
- “He is a member of the golfing club.” He is a member of a specific group/organization.

Note that “a/an” can only be used with **countable nouns**. (See another tutorial for identifying these.)

Choosing between “a” and “an”

You choose “a” or “an” based on the word immediately following the article.

- Most words beginning with consonants are modified by “a”: a car, a bike, a train.
- Most words beginning with vowels are modified by “an”: an owl, an orchard, an orange.

However, this can get tricky: you need to choose based on the *sound* of the following word, not necessarily the first letter.

- If the word begins with a consonant sound, use “a”: a university, a user. Here, university and user both start with the sound “yoo,” where the y is a consonant sound.
- If the word begins with a vowel sound, use “an”: an hour. The “h” in hour is silent, so the word starts with a vowel sound.
- The same rule applies for acronyms and abbreviations: an MSDS (“em” is the first sound, which is a vowel sound).

Using “the”

You use a definite article—“the”—when talking about a specific or particular noun. Remembering our examples for indefinite articles above, consider the change in a sentence’s meaning when the definite article is used:

- “I need the doctor (that I saw yesterday).” You are looking for a specific person, and only that person. This is true with or without the content in the parentheses, but usually in a context where it is clear *which* doctor you seek.
- “I’m going to adopt the black kitten.” There is a litter of kittens, and you are adopting a specific one.
- “I saw the owl again last night.” Here, you may have been telling someone about a certain owl that nests by your home, and that owl is the one that you saw again.

Definite articles and countable vs. uncountable nouns

Definite articles can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns, while indefinite articles can only be used for countable nouns. The examples above all use countable nouns, which is when you have to decide between “a/an” and “the.”

Below are some examples with uncountable nouns. When you have uncountable nouns, you have to decide between “the” and no article at all. Look at how the meanings of the example sentences below change with this choice. Here, again, remember that “the” refers to a *specific* item:

- “I love the music.” I love a specific musical composition or performance. You might say this after seeing a film, where you mean that you liked the soundtrack.

- o “I love music.” This is a general statement; you love music *in general*.
- “He spilled the water all over the floor.” If you just finished telling someone about how you went to the store to buy a gallon of purified drinking water, and then someone spilled it, you would say this: you are referring to *specific* water.
 - o “He spilled water all over the floor.” Perhaps there was a mishap with a bucket; water was spilled, but it wasn’t any specific water.

Remember, you would never say “I love a music” or “He spilled a water all over the floor,” because both “music” and “water” are uncountable nouns.

Some nouns don’t use articles: **academic subjects** and **sports** are two of these.

Exercise for Practice: Fill in the articles!

Yesterday when we went into the courtyard of our building for lunch, we saw an owl in a tree. We had never seen an owl before! This particular owl was pretty big and seemed to be sleepy – he had eaten a mouse and was feeling full. Even though there are lots of ___ mice and ___ birds in the courtyard, I doubt he will return – we disturbed ___ naptime too much! Still, I hope the big, sleepy owl might visit again. If he doesn’t, I might go to the/a zoo to see an owl up close.

Resources

- <http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/article.htm>
- <http://www.grammarly.com/handbook/grammar/articles/>
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/>
- <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-grammar/determiners-and-quantifiers/definite-article>
- <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-grammar/determiners-and-quantifiers/indefinite-article-and>