

[General Writing](#) • [Research and Citation](#) • [Teaching and Tutoring](#) • [Subject-Specific Writing](#) • [Job Search Writing](#) • [ESL](#)



*This page is brought to you by the OWL at Purdue (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>). When printing this page, you must include the entire legal notice at bottom.*

## Using Articles

**Summary:** This handout discusses the differences between indefinite articles (a/an) and definite articles (the).

**Contributors:** Paul Lynch, Allen Brizee, Elizabeth Angeli

**Last Edited:** 2011-03-03 10:04:28

What is an article? Basically, an article is an adjective. Like adjectives, articles modify nouns.

English has two articles: **the** and **a/an**. **The** is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; **a/an** is used to modify non-specific or non-particular nouns. We call **the** the *definite* article and **a/an** the *indefinite* article.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article

For example, if I say, "Let's read **the** book," I mean a *specific* book. If I say, "Let's read **a** book," I mean *any* book rather than a specific book.

Here's another way to explain it: **The** is used to refer to a *specific* or *particular* member of a group. For example, "I just saw **the** most popular movie of the year." There are many movies, but only one particular movie is the most popular. Therefore, we use **the**.

"A/an" is used to refer to a *non-specific* or *non-particular* member of the group. For example, "I would like to go see **a** movie." Here, we're not talking about a *specific* movie. We're talking about *any* movie. There are many movies, and I want to see *any* movie. I don't have a specific one in mind.

Let's look at each kind of article a little more closely.

### Indefinite Articles: a and an

"A" and "an" signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. For example:

- "My daughter really wants **a** dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog. We don't know which dog because we haven't found the dog yet.
- "Somebody call **a** policeman!" This refers to *any* policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.
- "When I was at the zoo, I saw **an** elephant!" Here, we're talking about a single, non-specific thing, in this case an elephant. There are probably several elephants at the zoo, but there's only *one* we're talking about here.

## Remember, using **a** or **an** depends on the sound that begins the next word. So...

- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant: *a boy; a car; a bike; a zoo; a dog*
- **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: *an elephant; an egg; an apple; an idiot; an orphan*
- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: *a user* (sounds like 'yoo-zer,' i.e. begins with a consonant 'y' sound, so 'a' is used); *a university; a unicycle*
- **an** + nouns starting with silent "h": *an hour*
- **a** + nouns starting with a pronounced "h": *a horse*
  - In some cases where "h" is pronounced, such as "historical," you can use **an**. However, **a** is more commonly used and preferred.
  - A historical event is worth recording.

Remember that these rules also apply when you use acronyms:

Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICaP) handles first-year writing at the University. Therefore, an ICaP memo generally discusses issues concerning English 106 instructors.

Another case where this rule applies is when acronyms start with consonant letters but have vowel sounds:

An MSDS (material safety data sheet) was used to record the data. An SPCC plan (Spill Prevention Control and Countermeasures plan) will help us prepare for the worst.

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between **a** and **an** depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

- **a** broken egg
- **an** unusual problem
- **a** European country (sounds like 'yer-o-pi-an,' i.e. begins with consonant 'y' sound)

Remember, too, that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a group:

- I am **a** teacher. (I am a member of a large group known as teachers.)
- Brian is **an** Irishman. (Brian is a member of the people known as Irish.)
- Seiko is **a** practicing Buddhist. (Seiko is a member of the group of people known as Buddhists.)

## Definite Article: **the**

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. **The** signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. For example:

"**The** dog that bit me ran away." Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.

"I was happy to see **the** policeman who saved my cat!" Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.

"I saw **the** elephant at the zoo." Here, we're talking about a *specific* noun. Probably there is only one elephant at the zoo.

## Count and Noncount Nouns

**The** can be used with noncount nouns, or the article can be omitted entirely.

- "I love to sail over **the** water" (some specific body of water) or "I love to sail over water" (any water).
- "He spilled **the** milk all over the floor" (some specific milk, perhaps the milk you bought earlier that day) or "He spilled milk all over the floor" (any milk).

"A/an" can be used only with count nouns.

- "I need **a** bottle of water."
- "I need **a** new glass of milk."

Most of the time, you can't say, "She wants a water," unless you're implying, say, a bottle of water.

## Geographical use of **the**

There are some specific rules for using **the** with geographical nouns.

Do not use **the** before:

- names of most countries/territories: *Italy, Mexico, Bolivia*; however, *the Netherlands, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, the United States*
- names of cities, towns, or states: *Seoul, Manitoba, Miami*
- names of streets: *Washington Blvd., Main St.*
- names of lakes and bays: *Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie* except with a group of lakes like *the Great Lakes*
- names of mountains: *Mount Everest, Mount Fuji* except with ranges of mountains like **the Andes** or **the Rockies** or unusual names like **the Matterhorn**
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West) except with island chains like **the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or the Canary Islands**

Do use **the** before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas: **the Nile, the Pacific**
- points on the globe: **the Equator, the North Pole**
- geographical areas: **the Middle East, the West**
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: **the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula**

## Omission of Articles

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities: *Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian* (unless you are referring to the population of the nation: "**The** Spanish are known for their warm hospitality.")
  - Names of sports: *volleyball, hockey, baseball*
  - Names of academic subjects: *mathematics, biology, history, computer science*
-