

Using Articles

- ♦ **Articles go before nouns.** A noun is a word that signals a person, place, thing, or idea. Look for nouns in the subjects of your sentences and as the objects of verbs and prepositions.
- ♦ If English is your second language, you may find that article usage is one of the most frustrating errors to correct in your writing. The more you read and write, the more familiar you will become with article usage in different kinds of phrasing and the more comfortable you will become. Don't be discouraged if "the rules" look simple but putting them into practice is challenging. While the rules are fairly straightforward, applying them often requires you to identify the different parts of speech in a sentence, as well as to analyze the context and meaning of different words in the sentence.

1. When you need to figure out which article to use ask yourself:

Is the noun **singular**—is there only one?

Use *an* with words beginning with a vowel

Is the noun **plural**— is there more than one?

Is the noun **general**—do you mean *any one* of a type of thing (for example, *any tree*)?

Is the noun **specific**—do you mean a particular example, instance, or kind of item; can you *point* to it? (for example, the oak tree outside your bedroom window)?

Can you **count** the item (like trees) or is it 'non-count' (like knowledge)?

2. Use *either one* of these basic charts to help decide which article to use in most situations:

a/ an	the	no article
singular + general	singular + specific	plural + general
	plural + specific	
	non-count specific	non-count general

	count nouns	non-count nouns
singular + general	a, an	no article
specific + singular	the	the
specific + plural	the	non-count nouns are always singular
all things/ things in general	no article	no article

Tips:

- Nouns ending in 's' are always plural and never take a/an: ~~a flowers~~ ~~an information~~.
- Words like *advice*, *faculty*, and *team* are collective nouns and can be singular *or* plural depending on the rest of the sentence, so watch out for them.
- When choosing between a/the look for adjectives and modifying phrases which make an item specific:
 - I was looking for *the* book for history class.
 - I want *the* band's new album.
 - She ate *the* last cookie.
 - He wants *the* scarf with fringe on it.
- Think about whether a noun can be divided/separated into parts to decide if it is count/non-count:
 - I drink coffee with breakfast. Students can enjoy free coffee at the Tutoring Center. (non-count)
 - I drank a cup of coffee at Starbucks. (count)
- Try to *think out loud* when deciding if the context of the sentence makes a noun general or specific:
 - I need to read *a* book for class. *Translation*: It can be *any* book, and I only need to read one. (singular, countable, *general*)
 - I need to buy *the* book for class. *Translation*: I need to buy *Introduction to Literature*. (singular, countable, *specific*)

A few additional situations and rules:

- ★ Articles are not used with pronouns, which are words such as *he*, *she*, *it*, *we*, *you*. If you have a possessive pronoun, a word like *my*, *their* or *your*, it will take the place of the article:
the book, my book, ~~the my book~~.
- ★ Gerunds (words like *studying*, *reading*, *working*) are verbs that act like a noun in a sentence. They will almost never use an article.
- ★ Nouns are usually part of noun phrases. Find the noun first, then identify the other words that relate to it. Put the article at the beginning of the noun phrase. Particularly, articles go before an adjective when an adjective comes before a noun: the fragrant tree, an easy class, the helpful information.
- ★ You don't need *a/an* or *the* if you have a word like *most*, *some*, *many*, or *all*.
- ★ Specific nouns take 'the'; except the first time you mention them in your writing. The 'first mention' takes *a/an* or no article:
 - A huge tree grew in front of my childhood home. The tree must have been fifty feet tall.
 - Trees surrounded the house. The trees made it difficult to see the house from the road.

Mini Practice: find the nouns and add articles where necessary in the paragraph below.

Articles are used in many languages. Some languages, such as Russian and Japanese do not use articles. Using them can be especially confusing for writers whose second language is English if their native language doesn't use articles. Student may work hard revising grammar in his or her essay before handing in assignment to instructor only to find that when instructor returns it, it is full of red marks where articles should be. It is important for student to have confidence in his or her writing because using articles really does get easier, and next assignment will be better.