

What is an article?

Articles are a type of determiner. They function like adjectives, as they modify the noun in the sentence. The only articles in English are 'the' and 'a/an'. Yet, the **tricky** part is that we use them differently – and sometimes not at all.

We call 'the' the definite article and 'a/an' the indefinite article.

When to use a/an, the and no article

So when do we use articles in English? We're going to show you some explanations, examples and activities to practise so that by the time you finish reading, you'll be an articles pro!

Definite and indefinite articles

the = definite a/an = indefinite

We use 'the' before a noun when:

- referring to something specific
- there is only one of something (e.g. the cathedral)
- the noun has been mentioned before

We use 'a/an' before a noun when:

- referring to something in general
- mentioning something for the first time
- describing someone's profession (eg. I am a teacher)

Compare these two sentences:

Let's watch the TV series that we love (a specific TV series that is familiar to us or that we know about.)

Let's watch a TV series after dinner (we don't have a specific TV series in mind – it could be any series.)

It's important to remember that we use 'a' and 'an' differently: 'a' comes before a noun beginning with a consonant sound and 'an' comes before a noun beginning with a vowel sound. For example:

A	An
car	elephant
girl	orange
zoo	announcement
building	umbrella
hotel	hour

If you were observant, you may be wondering why 'hotel' and 'hour' don't use the same indefinite article, even though they both start with 'h'. Remember, we need to look at the starting sound, not letter, and since 'hour' is pronounced with a silent 'h', it starts with a vowel sound – which means you need 'an'.

Here are some more examples of definite and indefinite articles:

- Somebody call **a** policeman!
- Did you see **the** film that was on Channel 4 last night?
- Would you like **a** glass of milk?
- I love to swim in **the** ocean.
- **The** announcement lasted for 10 minutes.

Learn more about the basics of definite and indefinite articles in this video:

No article

We never use a/an with uncountable nouns. However, 'the' is sometimes used with uncountable nouns in the same way it is used with plural countable nouns. This is when we want to refer to a specific object, group, or idea.

For example:

- **Electricity** has become more expensive recently.
- Can you pass me **the** sugar please?

It's a good idea to familiarise yourself with countable and uncountable nouns so you can make the right choice of article. See the table below for examples.

Countable	Uncountable
apple	fruit
suitcase	luggage
coin	money
friend	love
second	time

However, we use 'no article' in other situations without grammatical rules. In this case, it's something you have to remember.

Check out some of the following situations for knowing where you must **leave out** the article.

Use 'no article' before:

- **Names of languages and nationalities:** Chinese, Russian (unless referring to the population of the place e.g. 'The Italians are known for their delicious food.').
- **Names of sports:** cricket, baseball.
- **Names of subjects:** Art, Mathematics.

Geographical places

When it comes to geographical places, such as countries or continents, we use 'the' in some cases, and no article in others. Unfortunately, there aren't any rules to help you here – you just have to familiarise yourself with the ones that need 'the' or not.

Do NOT use 'the' before:

- **Lakes:** Lake Geneva, Lake Placids
- **Mountains:** Mount Fuji, Mount Everest.
- **Continents:** Europe, Asia.
- **Most countries:** England, Sweden.
- **Counties/states/provinces/regions:** Oxfordshire, Catalunya, California.
- **Cities, towns, villages:** London, Paris.
- **Islands:** Bali, Hawaii.
- **Street names:** Main Street, 5th Avenue.

Use 'the' before:

- **Rivers:** The Nile, The Mississippi.
- **Mountain ranges:** The Andes, The Pyrenees.
- **Deserts:** The Sahara, The Atacama.
- **Oceans and seas:** The Pacific, The Mediterranean.
- **Groups of islands:** The Maldives, The Seychelles.
- **Some countries:** The USA, The Netherlands.
- **Points on the globe:** The Equator, The North Pole.

- **Geographical areas:** The Middle East, The West.

Check out some of the most common mistakes with articles in this video:

Practice

Now you know the grammar, here's a short test for you to test your knowledge. Find the answers at the end of the blog – don't **peek!**

Answer the questions with: 'a/an', 'the' or 'no article'.

1. I love going on holiday to ____ Maldives.
2. Did you watch ____ the Mel Gibson film on TV last night?
3. Do you still live in ____ Bristol?
4. I've had ____ terrible headache all day.
5. The book is about someone who lives on ____ small island.
6. She lives in ____ Scotland now, but is from ____ Netherlands.
7. They speak ____ Chinese.
8. I'd love to go sailing along ____ Ganges river.
9. Who is that woman in ____ photograph?
10. Can I have ____ sugar in my coffee please?

Grammar explanation

Here are some of the most important things to know about using articles.

Jobs

When we say what people's jobs are, we usually use *a/an*.

*He's **an** architect.*

*She's **a** scientist.*

*My grandmother was **a** teacher.*

Singular nouns

Singular, countable nouns always have an article – *a/an* or *the* (or another determiner – *my, your, this, that*, etc.).

We use *a/an* – the indefinite article – when we talk about something for the first time, or something that is part of a group or type.

*I saw **a** good film yesterday.*

*Do you want **a** drink?*

We use *a* when the word that follows it begins with a consonant sound. We use *an* when it's followed by a vowel sound. This makes pronunciation easier.

*She has **a** university degree.*

*It took me **an** hour to get home.*

We use *the* – the definite article – when the listener already knows which thing we are talking about because it was mentioned before or because there's only one of them.

*I'm going to take **the** dog for a walk.*

*Have you seen **the** car key?*

*They go to **the** school next to **the** bridge.*

Things in general

When we talk about things in general, we normally use a plural or uncountable noun with no article.

Birds eat worms.

Water freezes at 0°C.

Children need a lot of sleep.

What are articles?

Articles are words that identify a [noun](#) as being specific or unspecific.

Consider the following examples:

*After **the** long day, **the** cup of tea tasted particularly good.*

By using the article *the*, we've shown that it was one specific day that was long and one specific cup of tea that tasted good.

*After **a** long day, **a** cup of tea tastes particularly good.*

By using the article *a*, we've created a general statement, implying that any cup of tea would taste good after any long day.

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English has two types of articles: definite and [indefinite](#). Let's discuss them now in more detail.

The definite article

[The definite article is the word *the*](#). It limits the meaning of a noun to one particular thing. For example, your friend might ask, "Are you going to **the** party this weekend?" The definite article tells you that your friend is referring to a specific party that both of you already know about. The definite article can be used with singular, [plural](#), or uncountable nouns. Below are [some examples](#) of the definite article, *the*, used in context:

*Please give me **the** hammer.*

*Please give me **the** red hammer; **the** blue one is too small.*

*Please give me **the** nails.*

*Please give me **the** large nail; it's **the** only one strong enough to hold this painting.*

*Please give me **the** hammer and **the** nails.*

The indefinite article

The indefinite article takes two forms. It's the word *a* when it precedes a word that begins with a consonant. It's the word *an* when it precedes a word that begins with a vowel. The indefinite article indicates that a noun refers to a general idea or category of a thing rather than a specific thing.

For example, you might ask your friend, "Should I bring **a** gift to the party?" Your friend will understand that you are not asking about a specific type of gift or a specific item. "I am going to bring **an** apple pie," your friend tells you. Again, the indefinite article indicates that she is not talking about a particular apple pie. Your friend probably doesn't even have any pie yet. The indefinite article appears only with singular nouns. Consider the following examples of indefinite articles used in context:

*Please hand me **a** book; any book will do.*

*Please hand me **an** autobiography; any autobiography will do.*

Exceptions: using *a* or *an*

There are a few exceptions to the general rule of using *a* before words that start with consonants and *an* before words that begin with vowels. The first letter of the word *honor*, for example, is a consonant, but it's unpronounced. Despite its spelling, the word *honor* begins with a vowel sound. Therefore, we use *an*. Consider the example sentence below for an illustration of this concept.

*My mother is **a** honest woman.*

*My mother is **an** honest woman.*

Similarly, when the first letter of a word is a vowel but is pronounced with a consonant sound, use *a*, as in the sample sentence below:

*She is **an** United States senator.*

*She is **a** United States senator.*

This holds true for acronyms and initialisms too: **an** LCD display, **a** UK-based company, **an** HR department, **a** URL.

An article before an adjective

Sometimes an article modifies a noun that is also modified by an [adjective](#). The usual word order is article + adjective + noun. If the article is indefinite, use *a* or *an* based on the word that immediately follows it. Consider the following examples for reference:

*Eliza will bring **a small gift** to Sophie's party.*

*I heard **an interesting story** yesterday.*

Indefinite articles with uncountable nouns

[Uncountable nouns](#) are nouns that are impossible to count, whether because they name intangible concepts (e.g., *information*, *animal husbandry*, *wealth*), collections of things that are considered as wholes (e.g., *jewelry*, *equipment*, *the working class*), or homogeneous physical substances (e.g., *milk*, *sand*, *air*). Although most of these nouns are singular in form, because they refer to things that can't be isolated and counted, they never take **a** or **an**.

Uncountable nouns can be modified by indefinite adjectives like *some*, however. Consider the examples below for reference:

*Please give me **a water**.*

Water is an uncountable noun and should not be used with the indefinite article.

*Please give me **some water**.*

If you describe the water in terms of a countable unit (like a bottle), you can use the indefinite article to modify the unit.

*Please give me **a bottle of water**.*

*Please give me **an ice**.*

*Please give me **an ice cube**.*

*Please give me **some ice**.*

Note that depending on the context, some nouns can be [countable or uncountable](#) (e.g., *hair*, *noise*, *time*):

*We need **a light** in this room.*

*We need **some light** in this room.*

Using articles with pronouns

Possessive [pronouns](#)—words like *his*, *my*, *our*, *its*, *her*, and *their*—can help identify whether you’re talking about specific or nonspecific items. As we’ve seen, articles also indicate specificity. But if you use both a possessive pronoun and an article together, readers will become confused. Articles should not be used with pronouns. Consider the examples below:

*Why are you reading **the my** book?*

The and *my* should not be used together, as they are both identifying the same noun. Instead, choose one or the other depending on the intended meaning:

*Why are you reading **the** book?*

*Why are you reading **my** book?*

Omission of articles

Occasionally, articles are omitted altogether before certain nouns. In these cases, the article is implied but not actually present. This implied article is sometimes called a “zero article.” Often, the article is omitted before a noun that refers to an abstract idea. Look at the following examples:

*Let’s go out for **a dinner** tonight.*

*Let’s go out for **dinner** tonight.*

***The creativity** is a valuable quality in children.*

***Creativity** is a valuable quality in children.*

Tip: The words for many [languages and nationalities](#) are not preceded by an article.

*I studied **the French** in high school for four years.*

*I studied **French** in high school for four years.*

Tip: Sports and academic subjects do not require articles.

*I like to play **the baseball**.*

*I like to play **baseball**.*

*My sister was always good at **the math**.*

*My sister was always good at **math**.*

Article FAQs

What is an article?

An article is a word that comes before a noun to show whether it's specific or general. Specific nouns use the article *the* and general nouns use the article *a* (or *an*, if the next word starts with a vowel sound).

What are definite and indefinite articles?

The definite article refers to something specific, and the indefinite article refers to something general. *The* is the definite article and *a/an* is the indefinite article.

What is an example of an article in grammar?

“**The** hammer” refers to only one hammer, but “**a** hammer” refers to any hammer.

When should we not use articles?

We don’t use the indefinite article with uncountable nouns, or any article with a possessive pronoun. Certain nouns such as nationalities, school subjects, and sports often don’t take articles, especially when they refer to general or abstract ideas.