



Articles

What are articles?

Articles are markers that identify nouns. English uses three articles: the definite article “the” and the indefinite articles “a” and “an.”

Which Article Do I Use?

1. Countable vs. Noncountable Nouns

A and **AN** are used in sentences where the noun can be counted.

- "I ran into **A POST**." (How many posts did you run into? Just one. Therefore, use **A**.)
- "I ran into **THE WATER**." (How many waters did you run into? Water isn't usually counted, so use **THE**.)

2. Definite vs. Indefinite Nouns

A and **AN** signal that the modified noun is indefinite, that it refers to any member of a group. **THE** signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group.

- **A** dog (any dog)
- **THE** dog (that specific dog)
- **A** book (just any book)
- **THE** book (the book that you are reading right now)

Note: **THE** is also used when the noun is unique: **THE** Spartan Center, **THE** theory of relativity.

3. First vs. Subsequent Mention

A or **AN** is used to introduce a noun when it is mentioned for the first time. **THE** is used afterward each time the noun is mentioned.

- **AN** awards ceremony is held every spring to honor Northampton students, but this year interest in **THE** ceremony is particularly high because so many students are outstanding.

Note: **THERE IS** and **THERE ARE** can be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or essay.

- **THERE IS** a feeling of excitement at the beginning of each semester.

4. General vs. Specific

A, **AN**, and **THE** can all be used to indicate that the noun is referring to the whole class to which a countable noun belongs. This use of the article is called "generic."

- **A** tiger is a dangerous animal. (every tiger)
- **THE** tiger is a dangerous animal. (all tigers)

The difference between the indefinite **A** and **AN** and the generic **A** and **AN** is that the former means any one member of a class while the latter means all of the members of a class.

Note: The omission of the article also expresses a generic (or general) meaning:

- With a plural noun: Tigers are dangerous animals. (all tigers)
- With a noncountable noun: Jealousy is a destructive emotion. (jealousy in general or any kind of jealousy)

When Can I Omit the Article?

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

- Names of languages: Chinese, English, French: She speaks Chinese.
- Names of sports: basketball, volleyball, hockey: Hockey is an expensive sport.
- Names of academic subjects: mathematics, accounting, history: Mathematics is my favorite subject.