# ARTICLES (A, AN, THE): CHOOSING APPROPRIATELY

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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In order to choose the appropriate article for a noun, you first need to decide whether the noun is singular. One way to determine this is to ask yourself whether you could put the number "one" in front of it. For example, you can say "one *experiment*," but not "one *knowledge*" or "one *examples*"; therefore, "experiment" is singular, whereas "knowledge" is uncountable and "examples" is plural.

**Table 3** below shows that if the noun is singular, you must use either "the" or "a"/"an" in front of the noun, depending on whether it is definite (known to both you and your readers) or not.

If the noun is not singular, then it must be either plural or uncountable. **Table 3** below shows that article usage is the same for both plural and uncountable nouns will use either "the" or "0" (no article) in front of the noun. Again, the decision depends on whether the noun is definite or not.

## Table 3: Choosing the Appropriate Article

1. **Singular Noun** (one of something that is countable)
   **Is the noun definite?**

**YES: Use "the"**
   a) The *painting* in the *living room* was given to me by an old friend.

   o *Painting* and *living room* are singular because we are referring to only one painting and one living room.
   o *Painting* is definite because the following phrase, *in the living room*, makes it clear which painting we are referring to (reason 4, above). (However, it could be indefinite if there is more than one painting in the living room that the speaker could be referring to; in that case, the speaker would say "*A painting….*"
   o *Living room* is definite because it is clear from the context of the situation that the speaker is referring to the living room closest to where he and the listener are standing (reason 5 above).

**NO: Use "a" or "an"**
b) Eugene's lunch consisted of *a sandwich*, two cookies, and *a can* of soda.

   o *Sandwich* and *can* are both singular (there is only one of each). They *could* be definite if the listener/reader had seen Eugene's sandwich and can of soda, or if they had been mentioned before. However, the speaker/writer's choice of the indefinite article *a* for both nouns tells us that they are unknown to the listener/reader.

2. **Plural or Uncountable Noun**
   **Is the noun definite?**

**YES: Use "the"**
   c) *The* technical *reports* that I gave you are top secret. (plural and definite)

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o  *Reports,* is plural (note that it ends in –*s*) because we are talking about more than one report. It is definite because the following phrase, *that I gave you*, makes it clear to the reader/listener which reports you are referring to (reason 4, above).

d) *The wool* that is produced in Scotland is used to make sweaters and other garments. (uncountable and definite)

o  *Wool* is uncountable (you cannot say *one wool*). It is definite because the following clause, *that is produced in Scotland*, makes it clear which wool you are referring to (reason 4, above).

**NO: Use 0 (no article)**

e) Long *reports* are difficult to write. (plural and indefinite)

o  *Reports* is plural (note that it ends in –*s*). The lack of an article in front of it means that the speaker/writer is talking not about particular reports that are known to the listener/reader, but about all long reports in general.

f) Scotland's major exports are *wool* and *oil*. (uncountable and indefinite).

o  *Wool* and *oil* are both uncountable nouns (you cannot say *one wool* or *one oil* in this context). They are indefinite because they refer to these two substances in general, not to particular shipments of wool and oil that are known to the reader/listener.

**LEARNING HINT #2:** One of the most common mistakes that non-native speakers make with articles is using *a* or *an* with plural or uncountable nouns (*a students* and *a research* would be incorrect). But consider that the articles *a* and *an* are derived from the word *one*. Thus, it is illogical to use *a* or *an* with a plural noun, isn't it? It is also illogical to use *a* or *an* with an uncountable noun–After all, how can you have *one* of something that is uncountable?

An easy way to eliminate a lot of mistakes is to look through your writing for every occurrence of *a* and *an*. Then examine the noun that follows each *a* or *an*. If the noun is either plural or uncountable, then you have made a mistake, and you should refer to **Table 3** to determine whether to use *the* or 0 instead.

**LEARNING HINT #3:** Often mistakes occur not because a writer has used the wrong article (e.g., *a* or *an* instead of *the*), but because the writer has used no article at all for a singular noun. Notice in **Table 3** that every singular noun must have an article in front of it.

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**LEARNING HINT #4:** Notice that every definite noun takes the article *the*, regardless of whether it is singular, plural, or uncountable. Therefore, if you cannot decide whether a noun is singular, plural, or uncountable, go on to the next step and ask yourself whether it is definite (known to both the writer/speaker and the reader/listener) or not. If it is definite, then use *the*.

So far, we have been talking only about using articles with common nouns. The rules for proper nouns are more complex.

*Proper nouns* are names of particular people, places, and things (John F. Kennedy, New York City, Notre Dame Cathedral), and for that reason they are inherently definite. Nevertheless, the definite article is not used with most **singular proper** nouns. For example, if you are referring to your friend George, you wouldn't say "*The* George and I went to a movie last night." The only times "the" is used with a name like this are: a) when you want to be emphatic, as in "*the* Elizabeth Taylor" (to emphasize that you are talking about the famous actress, and not about another woman with the same name), and b) when you are actually using the name as a common noun, as in "*the* George that I introduced you to last night" (the real meaning of this phrase is "*the man named* George…"). **Plural** names, on the other hand, are always preceded by *the*: *the* Johnsons, *the* Bahamas, etc.

Singular geographical names are very irregular with respect to article usage. For example, singular names of continents (Asia, Africa), mountains (Mount Fuji), and bays (San Francisco Bay) do not take the article *the*, but regions (the Crimea), deserts (the Sahara), and other geographical entities do.

Indeed, the use of articles with singular proper nouns is complex and hence difficult to learn, as indicated by the examples below. For this reason, the best thing to do is to memorize whether the proper nouns that you use frequently are used with or without *the*.

**Examples:**
*State Street*
*the Empire State Building*
*Delaware County*
*Great Britain*
*the Soviet Union*
*the University of Virginia*
*Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*
*the United Nations (the U.N.)*
*the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries*
*(but "OPEC," not "the OPEC")*

**"A" Versus "An"**

This last topic is undoubtedly the easiest, because most non-native speakers already know about the difference between *a* and *an*. They are simply two variations of the **indefinite article**. *A* is used before words that begin with consonant sounds (*a rock, a large park*) and *an* is used before vowel sounds (*an interesting subject, an apple*).

However, note that the choice of *a* or *an* depends on pronunciation, not spelling. Many words that begin with the vowel *–u–* are preceded by *a* instead of *an* because the *–u–* spelling is often pronounce *–yu-*, as in *useful* ("*a useful* idea"), and *uranium* ("*a uranium* isotope"). In addition, in a few words borrowed from

French, the initial consonant *–h–* is not pronounced: *an heir* to the throne, *an hour*-long lecture, *an honorable* agreement, etc.

**A Strategy for Success**

Keep in mind that native speakers of English seldom use articles incorrectly; therefore, any errors that you make are very noticeable and distracting to them. That is why you should make an effort to use articles correctly.

Study this handout–particularly **Five Sources of Definiteness**, **Table 3**, and the **Learning Hints**. Memorize the definition of definiteness ("known to both the writer/speaker and the reader/listener"). Then try the Exercise toward the end of this handout; the correct answers are provided on the following page so you can check your work.

In the future, whenever you write in English, you will need to proofread your writing carefully and to apply the rules for article usage very deliberately. Then come to the Writing Center and ask a tutor specifically to correct any remaining errors in your article usage. With practice, you can learn to use articles correctly–not only in writing, but also in speech!

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