Guide to Articles

The, a, and an are articles classified as adjectives because they usually modify nouns.

The choice of an article depends on the noun that it modifies and the situation.

First, choose the type of noun you will be modifying. Then determine the article to be used. Nouns are generally classified as persons, places or things. Nouns that generally are called “things” or ideas are the ones most frequently using a modifying article and can be referred to as follows:

A count noun is one that can be made plural or singular and can have a number in front of it, but not always. However, it is specific. This usually applies to nouns classified as things or people. Names of places (Atlanta, etc.) or people (Jane, Bob) usually do not use articles.

Examples: a green apple/three apples

a happy boy/four boys

Downtown Atlanta is hot today.

A non-count noun is one that usually has no plural form and refers to things or words that are normally considered as a whole. Abstract nouns are also non-countable.

Examples: butter, luggage, furniture. Abstract examples are information, hostility, hope, love

I. The article the is classified as definite. It is used to point out or refer to a specific noun that can be counted.

Examples: I need to go to the (singular, specific) downtown store to buy fish.

I need to go to the (plural, specific) downtown stores to shop.
1. Use the article **the** with a noun used in a specific, singular way.

   Example: The old chair that belonged to my grandmother is in storage.

2. Use the article **the** with a specific noun in the plural.

   Example: The lace handkerchiefs in the blue box were thrown out.

**II.** The articles **a** and **an** are classified as **indefinite** or nonspecific or general. They usually do not modify nouns that can be counted. Idiomatic expressions may be exceptions.

Examples: I need to go to a (any, nonspecific, singular) store for groceries.

   I need an (any will do) apple for lunch.

Remember: Use **a** when the word following it begins with a consonant.

   Use **an** when the word following it begins with a vowel.

   **Important Note:** Use **an** with words that begin with vowels that have hard sounds, such as “y” sounds (European, universe, union) and “w” sounds (one, once).

Other rules for the correct use of articles:

1. Use **no article** with plural count nouns when describing them,

   Example: Dogs are fun pets. Cats are self-sufficient.

   … or with singular mass nouns when describing them.

   Example: Coffee can be bad for some people.

2. Use **a** or **an** with a generic noun that is countable.

   Example: A new language is difficult to learn. A child is precious.

3. Use **a** or **an** when describing a countable noun that is real but not specific.

   Examples: A child was playing outside. An apple is in the refrigerator.
4. Use **some** when describing a plural countable noun in a nonspecific way.

Example: I found some apples on the table.

---

**An Article Chart**

NOUNS

COUNT NOUNS

SINGULAR

DEFINITE – use the (specific)

INDEFINITE – use a or an (nonspecific)

PLURAL

INDEFINITE – no article

DEFINITE – use the

NON-COUNT NOUNS

INDEFINITE – no article

DEFINITE – use the

---

**ALL DEFINITE nouns (both count and non-count)** – use the

**SINGULAR INDEFINITE COUNT nouns** – use a or an

**All other INDEFINITE nouns (count and non-count)** – no article