



GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Using Definite and Indefinite Articles

Articles belong to a group of modifiers known as determiners, words that help us identify or determine which particular example or examples of a noun are being referred to. Articles—including the definite article “the” and the indefinite articles “a” and “an”—are by far the most common determiners. The series of questions below is designed to help you decide which article to use and when to use no article at all.

On the next few pages you will find specific explanations of how to use the questions.

1. Does the reader know which one or ones you mean?

YES

Use “the”

NO

Go to Question 2

2. Is the noun singular or plural?

SINGULAR

Go to Question 3

PLURAL

Use no article

3. Can the noun be made plural?

YES

Go to Question 4

NO

Use no article

4. Are you talking about a particular example or a general idea?

PARTICULAR

Go to Question 5

GENERAL

Use no article

5. Does the noun begin with a vowel sound?

YES

Use “an”

NO

Use “a”

QUESTION 1: Does the reader know which one or ones you mean by the noun?

In English, use “the” to indicate that your readers or listeners know which particular thing(s) or person(s) you are talking about. The following are some of the conditions in which readers can be expected to know this:

- There is only one:
The sun is shining today
The Empire State Building is on 34th Street.
- There is only one in the physical environment you are describing:
The library is open late during exam week.
Please close **the door**.
- The noun names a socially recognized institution, and is being used to refer to that institution in general rather than a particular example of it:
The family is the place where values are taught.
The government exists to serve the people.
- You have previously mentioned the thing or person in question:
For example, after you have mentioned a tall building, it can later be described as **the building**.
- The reader can assume from the context that there must be one there:
For example, if you mention a classroom, and then mention **the desks**, you can assume we know about the desks because classrooms generally have desks.
- You identify the particular one you are talking about in the noun phrase itself, usually in a modifier that follows the noun:
In the phrase **the art of writing**, the words **of writing** identify which particular art is meant
In the phrase **the woman who lives next door**, the words **who lives next door** identify a particular woman.
Note: In every community, certain familiar nouns, usually places, are treated as known by the whole community. For example, we say **the beach, the hospital, the doctor’s office** to indicate places everyone is familiar with, even though there may be many possible examples for each noun. That is, we don’t all go to the same doctor’s office, but since we all go to some doctor’s office, we speak of it as a familiar experience.

The trick is knowing which nouns a particular community considers familiar. Hospitals, grocery stores, and subways are all considered familiar in New York, but schools, churches, and schools are not.

We take **the subway** and go to **the grocery store**, but we go to **church** and to **school**.

QUESTION 2: Is the noun singular or plural?

This is a straightforward question, but remember, not all plural nouns are marked by an “-s.”

QUESTION 3: Can the noun be made plural?

Most English nouns have both a singular and a plural form, meaning that you can describe one or more than one of them. In other words, they are countable. But some nouns are considered uncountable. They have no plural form, and they don’t appear with the article “a” or “an.”

- They may describe things that can’t easily be separated into individual pieces, for example, **air, dirt, sunlight, water**.
- They also may include activities, like **thinking, eating, or dancing**.
- They may refer to things that come in collections, rather than as individual items, for example, **furniture, rice, and homework**.
- They may also refer to abstract ideas like **beauty, peace, happiness**.

QUESTION 4: Are you talking about a particular instance or a general idea?

Perhaps the trickiest aspect of nouns in English is that some nouns can be thought of as either countable or uncountable, but there is a difference in meaning between the two. A noun is treated as uncountable when it refers to a general idea or an abstract concept rather than to a particular instance.

For example, we may speak of **life** in general, as in “**Life** can be hard” or we may refer to a particular life: “I long for **a life** filled with adventure.”

Nouns that have both a countable and an uncountable sense are generally abstract nouns, that is, they refer to things that cannot be seen or touched, like **love, death, war, fear, anger**. But some nouns that name concrete things can also have an uncountable sense. Many of these are food items, like **chicken, fruit, pie, fish**. Each of these nouns can refer to a particular thing, but when they are used to refer to food generally, they become uncountable. Thus, **a pie** comes out of the oven, but we eat pie for dessert. You can cook **a chicken**, but when we eat it, it’s just chicken. It’s as if the particular chicken we eat is just a representative of the larger concept of chicken as food.

QUESTION 5: Does the next word begin with a vowel sound?

This seems like an easy question, but it’s really the sound of the word that matters, not the letter it starts with. Most words beginning with the five vowels have a vowel sound, and with them you should always use “an,” but some words beginning with “u” have a “y” sound, and with them “a” should be used, for example, **a university, a unique** person . On the other hand, some words beginning with “h” have a vowel sound, and “an” should be used with them, for example, **an hour, an honest man**.

Note: As the examples above show, the next word will not always be a noun. Sometimes an adjective comes between the article and the noun. In these cases, it is the sound of the adjective that determines your choice between “a” and “an.”