

ARTICLES

Articles are determiners or adjectives that precede nouns and clarify whether the noun is general or specific in a given sentence. Using the incorrect article will immediately sound odd to native English language speakers.

A singular count or countable noun – meaning something that can be counted – always needs a determiner, which is usually an article. (e.g., I ate a taco. I am sitting on the chair). Plural countable nouns need a determiner, which could be an article or could be a word that indicates amount. (e.g., The passengers filled all the seats. She ate three tacos).

An article is not used with a noncount or uncountable noun. (e.g., I like to eat rice. She’s feeling a lot of sadness today.)

INDEFINITE ARTICLES: “A” OR “AN”

Use “a/an” when making a general reference: talking about an example of person, place, or thing, not a specific person, place, or thing. Use “a” with nouns that begin with consonants and “an” with nouns that begin with vowels. Below are a few examples:

- I want to buy a house in Nevada.
- The company is searching for a Public Relations specialist.
- I hope to present my sculptures in an art gallery someday.

Note that the writer does not have in mind a specific house to buy, a specific person to fill that position, or a specific art gallery to display their sculptures. Any house in the state, any person with qualifications, and any art gallery might be suitable.

DEFINITE ARTICLE: “THE”

Use “the” when referring to a specific or particular person, place, or thing that your listener/reader knows about, including if you have already referred to something previously. Below are a few examples:

- The novel was translated into fifteen languages.
- The road that we took was windy.
- We ate at a Chinese restaurant last night. The restaurant was crowded.

Note that the writer references a specific novel that was translated and a specific road that they took. In the third example, the writer first mentions a restaurant that is a general cultural or culinary type, but then in the second sentence references that one particular restaurant.

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Special uses of “the”

1. Use “the” when referring to a unique object that is singular.

- He is staring up at the sky.
- You can probably find that recipe on the internet.

Note that there is only one sky on Earth and there is only one internet, so we always use “the.”

2. Use “the” when you are talking about the concept of something.

- The dog is a very loyal animal.
- The computer has changed the world.

Note that here the writer is not talking about one specific dog or computer; instead, they are describing the understanding or perception of dogs and of computers. You can also write “Dogs are very loyal animals.” and “Computers have changed the world.”

3. Use “the” with particular locations.

- the names of rivers, oceans, and seas (the Atlantic Ocean)
- points on the globe (the North Pole)
- geographical areas (the South)
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Amazon Rainforest, the Persian Gulf)
- groups of islands and groups of lakes (the Canary Islands, the Great Lakes)
- countries that are made up of islands or states (the United States of America).
- many universities (the University of Nevada)

There are some exceptions to using “the” with locations, however. Do not use “the” with the following:

- cardinal directions (south, northwest)
- a university acronym or universities based on names (UNLV, Stanford University)
- common places that you are traveling to or located in (home, school, work)
e.g., I am at home. I am going to temple. I am in bed.

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