UNIV | WR TING CENTER 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.

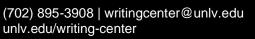
DEFINITE ARTICLE: "THE"

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.

Handout created for the UNLV Writing Center by Madina Tuhbatullina, February 2023.