

Grammar Articles

Articles modify nouns, and their presence always indicates that a noun will follow. They are located either directly before the noun or before one or more adjectives that also modify the noun. There are two **indefinite articles** (*a* and *an*) and one **definite article** (*the*).

WHEN NOT TO USE AN ARTICLE

There are several cases in which you should not precede a noun with an article:

- ◀ Before the names of languages, sports, and fields of study
- ◀ When the noun is modified by a **demonstrative pronoun** (Examples: *this, that, those, these*, etc.)
- ◀ When the noun is modified by a **possessive pronoun** (Examples: *my, his, her, its, their, your*, etc.)
- ◀ When the noun is modified by various other **quantity words** that indicate a noun will follow (Examples: *all, another, each, every, many, much, some*, etc.)

WHEN TO USE AN ARTICLE

Often, you can tell which article to use with a noun by answering the following questions in the order listed. To better understand this process of selecting the correct article, refer to the chart at the end of this handout.

1. PROPER OR COMMON NOUN?

- ◀ A **proper noun** is the specific name of an individual person, place, or thing (or the specific name of several such individuals). (Examples: *John, Tokyo, UVSC*) Use *the* before **plural proper nouns**. (Examples: *the Smiths, the Rocky Mountains*) Use no article before **singular proper nouns**. (Examples: *John Smith, Mount Rushmore*)
- ◀ A **common noun** is not a name, but a general group. (Examples: *person, city, college*) To decide if a common noun needs an article, you must decide if the noun is specific or general (next section).
- ◀ **Exceptions:** Use *the* with the **proper noun** (name) of a historical event, historical period, highway, building, hotel, museum, river, ocean, sea, point on a globe (Examples: *the Equator* or *the East*), desert, forest, gulf, or peninsula. Only use *the* with the name of a country if the name is plural, as in *the Netherlands*, or if it is a phrase, such as *the Dominican Republic*.

2. SPECIFIC OR GENERAL NOUN?

- ◀ **Specific nouns** refer to a specific member or to several specific members of a general category. Normally, they require the definite article, *the*. (Example: *The dogs are ugly*. [Here, the word *dogs* refers to specific, individual animals.])
- ◀ **General nouns** always refer to a general class of something, rather than to a specific member of a class. (Example: *Dogs are man's best friends*. [The word *Dogs* refers to a class of animals, not to any specific animals.]) To decide if a general noun needs an article, determine whether it is countable. (See next section.)
- ◀ **Note:** Often when a specific noun is mentioned for the first time, it is treated like a general noun. However, any time the noun is mentioned thereafter, the definite article (*the*) is used. (Example: *Yesterday morning, I bought a book. But it was not until evening that I was finally able to read the book.*)

3. UNCOUNTABLE OR COUNTABLE NOUN?

- ◀ **Uncountable nouns** cannot be numbered. (Examples: *jewelry, happiness, and dirt* [These words are uncountable, since it makes no sense to discuss *three jewelries, three happinesses, or three dirt.*]) Generally, you should not precede uncountable nouns with articles.
- ◀ **Countable nouns** refer to something that can be counted. (Examples: *baby, thought, and problem*). To determine if a countable noun needs an article, decide if it is plural or singular (next section).

Grammar Articles

- ◄ **Exceptions:** Sometimes, an uncountable noun can be made a specific noun. In such cases, use the definite article *the*. This normally occurs (1) if the uncountable noun is modified by a phrase or clause that makes it more specific and limited or (2) if the uncountable noun refers to a specific portion, amount, or collection of the uncountable noun.

EXAMPLE: John ate dirt. (The word *dirt* does not refer to any specific pile of dirt.)

EXAMPLE: John scooped up some dirt with his shovel. Then, to my dismay, he ate the dirt. (The word *dirt* is preceded by *the* because the writer is referring to a specific pile of dirt.)

4. PLURAL OR SINGULAR NOUN?

- ◄ If the noun is **plural** (and also general), no article is needed.
- ◄ If the noun is **singular**, an indefinite article (*a* or *an*) is needed.
- ◄ **Exceptions:** A countable, singular noun may sometimes take the definite article (*the*) when it refers to a general group. (Example: *The cat is a great pet.* [*The cat* refers to the general group of all cats.])

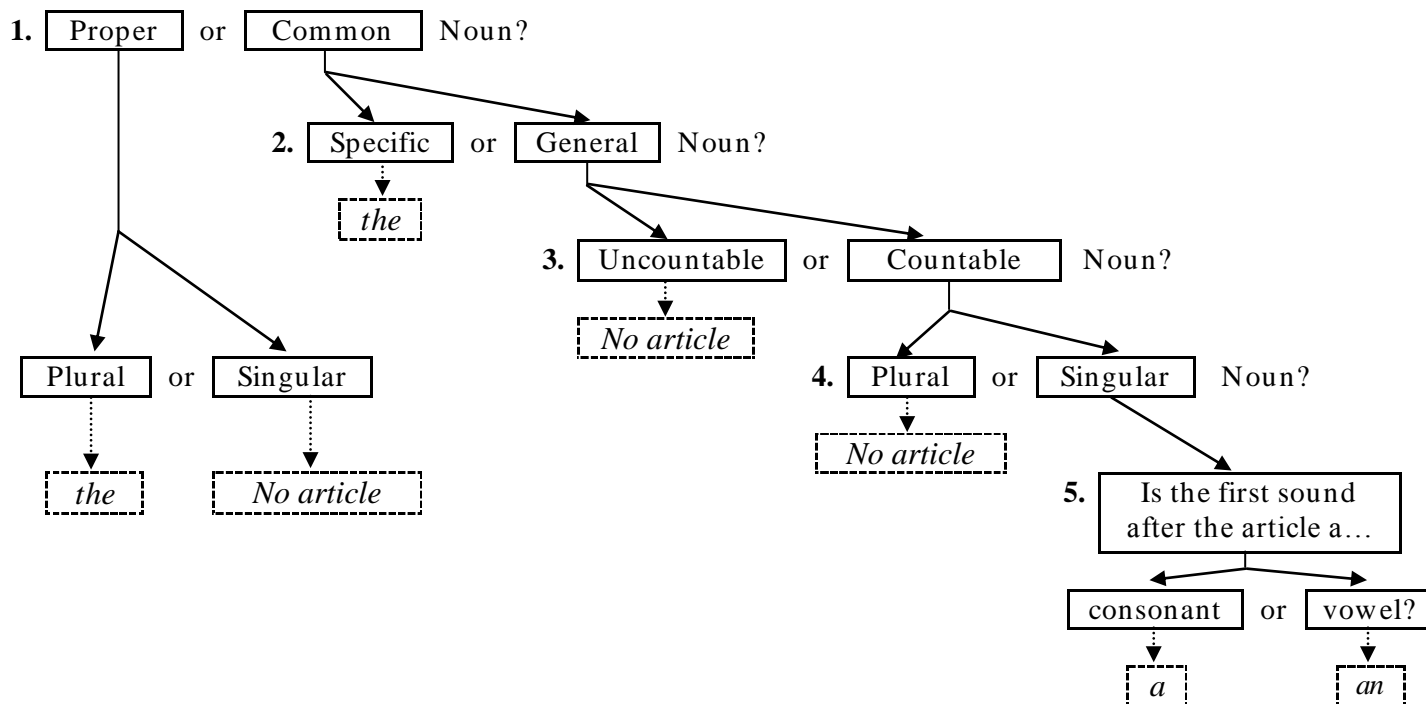
5. WHICH INDEFINITE ARTICLE (A OR AN)?

- ◄ Use “**an**” before a word that begins with a vowel sound.
- ◄ Use “**a**” before a word that begins with a consonant sound.
- ◄ Note that the choice is determined by the word directly after the article, even if the word is an adjective, rather than the noun. (Example: *An ugly dog* versus *a dog*)
- ◄ Also, note that the choice is determined by the **sound** of the following word, not the written letter. (Examples: *an hour*, *a uniform*, *a wonderful day*, *an FBI agent*)

SOME SPECIFIC CASES

The article *the* is always used in the following cases: before the word *same* and before an ordinal number (Example: *the first child*).

WHICH ARTICLE TO USE?



Adapted from Raimes, Ann. "Articles at a Glance." *Keys for Writers: A Brief Handbook*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999. 378.