

## Understanding Articles

Articles are a kind of adjective that can be used before different types of nouns; they answer the question “Which one?” There are two types of articles: *definite* and *indefinite*.

### Definite Articles

*The* is called a definite article. It is used with singular or plural specific nouns, both count and non-count. The word *the* is used with a noun that has been identified or named earlier.

*The fish swim in the lake.*  
*The men climb the mountains.*  
*The water is hot.*

The definite article can also be used when referring to something that is unique in nature.

*The sun warms the earth.*  
*The Great Plains are east of the Rocky Mountains.*  
*The Ring of Fire is in the Pacific Ocean.*

The word *the* is required because the noun is referring to something that is only one of its kind.

The definite article can also be used when referring to the following:

- Names that include the word *of*: *the United States of America, the Republic of China*
- All plural names: *the Philippines, the Alps*
- Nouns that represent something abstract: *The judge found **the injustice** to be intolerable.*

*The* can be used with count or non-count nouns:

*the chairs*                      *the furniture*  
*the classes*                    *the homework*

### Indefinite Articles

*A* and *an* are the indefinite articles. They are used with unspecified singular count nouns. Indefinite articles are not normally used with non-count nouns, such as *advice* or *information*.

The word *a* is used before a single count noun that begins with a **consonant sound**.

*a university*            *a car*                      *a circus*  
*a union*                      *a building*              *a megaphone*

The word *an* is used before a single count noun that begins with a **vowel sound**:

*an hourglass*            *an apple*                *an eagle*  
*an honor*                      *an umbrella*            *an area*

## Complications with Articles

We do not usually use articles with abstract nouns referred to in a general sense (*love*) or with the following:

Names of languages (*English*)

Names of sports (*soccer*)

Names of seasons (*spring*)

Names of academic subjects (*math*)

Names of cities and states (*Utah*)

Names of diseases (*cancer*)

Names of continents (*Africa*)

Names of islands (*Pohnpei*)

Names of meals (*dinner*)

Article rules can be complicated and are often broken or applied inconsistently. For more information on article use, consult an English language or online ESL guide such as <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar> and search for *articles* or *determiners*.

Contributed by Andrew Warren ☺



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