

Articles: A, An, The

An article **indicates** whether **the noun** which follows it is meant **generally or specifically**. English has two articles: **a or an, the indefinite article**, does not define a particular referent and **the, the definite article**, presents a noun with a specific referent. The form of the indefinite article depends on the sound that follows it.

A proceeds consonant sounds, which includes words beginning with *u-* or *eu-*.

a hat a person a unit a university a European

An proceeds vowel sounds, which includes words beginning with a muted *h*.

an hour an honor an egg an honest person an art

A (or an) is used with:

1. a singular non-specific countable noun when first mentioned

We saw a tree. The tree was full of birds.

I am thinking of a place. Can you guess the place?

2. a singular countable noun used generically

A bird lays eggs.

An elephant can outrun a person.

3. a noun complement, including the names of professions

She is an excellent speaker.

He is an electrician.

4. certain expressions which indicate a quantity

a dozen

a gross (144)

a hundred

a million

a lot of

a great many

a great deal

a few

a little

Note well the difference:

a few / a little means 'a small number,' 'a small amount'

few / little means 'a scarcity or lack'

We saw a few birds.

Maybe three or four birds, not too many.

We saw few birds.

Birds were scarce.

We have a little time.

We have some time, but not very much.

We have little time.

We are pressed for time. We may not have enough.

5. in exclamations before a singular specific noun

What a day!

What a concert!

6. before a name, to imply that the person is a stranger to the speaker

She said that a Mr. Emerson called.

She did not know Mr. Emerson was.

If she knew him, she would say simply 'Mr. Emerson'.

A (or an) is not used with plural nouns nor with non-countable nouns, such as *advice, information, or news*.

The specifies a particular one and thus is used:

1. when there is only one

the earth, the sky, the weather, the North Pole

2. when there is only one in the context

Please pass the sugar. (*the sugar on the table*)

The plumber was here. (*the one you had called*)

3. when the noun has already been mentioned

Imagine a tree. Is the tree large?

4. when the noun is made definite by explanation

the place where we met; the girl's hair

5. when followed by superlative adjectives

the highest mountain; the slowest animal

6. with singular nouns used to represent a class

The camel can go for weeks without water.

7. with an adjective used to represent a class

the rich and the poor, the living and the dead, the wild

8. with names of seas, rivers, mountain chains, groups of islands, and plural names of countries

the Atlantic, the Carribean, the Nile, the Rockies, the Azores, the United States, the Netherlands

The is not used with nouns used in an abstract or general sense, such as:

nature, love, truth, beauty, death, sadness or school, church, prison, Court, bed (mostly places)

A singular noun (article or some other) must be used with a determiner.

Peacock: a singular noun, requires a determiner

My peacock, some peacock, that peacock, a peacock, the peacock

All singular nouns require a determiner!

Some problematic examples of article use

Discuss the following examples.

1. Ride a bus Ride the bus
2. go to the doctor go to the hospital
3. go to the store
4. a dog chases cats the dog chases cats
5. a/the peacock is the national bird of India
6. a king's chair is called a throne
king's chairs are called thrones
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a king: implies more than one king
the king: only one