

ARTICLES

How to use articles

THE = THE DEFINITE ARTICLE:

- It refers to a **specific person or thing** or to a specific group of people or things:
 - the teacher, the pencil, the bird / the teachers, the pencils, the birds

A/AN = INDEFINITE ARTICLES:

- It refers to a **single person or thing**
- It does **not refer a specific one, but any one**:
 - a building, a student, a horse / an expert, an accountant, an insect
- A** is used before words that begin with a **consonant sound**:
 - a car, a woman, a university, a UFO
- An** is used before words that begin with a **vowel sound**:
 - an apple, an idea, an hour, an MRI

USING ARTICLES WITH SINGULAR COUNTABLE NOUNS:

The:

- It has the same meaning as the word **that** although **that** is more emphatic.
- Both refer to a particular object or person **known to both** the speaker and the listener:
 - Did you take **the book** to school? is similar to: Did you take **that book** to school?
 - They spoke to **the nurse**. is similar to: They spoke to **that nurse**.
- It can be used in a more **general sense** in a few cases:
 - The morning** can refer to that part of any day—or to one specific morning
 - The computer** can refer to the device in general—or to one specific unit
 - The wolf** can refer to the entire species—or to an individual animal; etc.
 - The evening** is the nicest part of the day.
 - When traveling, he prefers **the train** to **the bus**.
 - The telegraph** was used before **the telephone**.
 - The owl** is a species that hunts in **the night**.
- It is also usually used with **certain terms** such as universe, earth, world, moon, etc.:
 - The universe** is said to be infinite.
 - The moon** orbits **the earth**.
 - The world** is filled with wonders.
 - The solar system** is vast.

A/an:

- They have the same meaning as **one**, but **one** gives more emphasis on the idea of only a single one.
 - A police** officer helped us. is similar to: **One police** officer helped us.
 - We saw **an elephant** at the zoo. is similar to: We saw **one elephant** at the zoo.

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ARTICLES

continued

USING ARTICLES WITH PLURAL COUNTABLE NOUNS:

- The**
- It has the same meaning as the word **those** although **those** is more emphatic.
 - Both refer to particular objects or people **known to both the speaker and the listener**:
 - Did you take **the books** to school? is similar to: Did you take **those books** to school?
 - They spoke to **the nurses**. is similar to: They spoke to **those nurses**.
- No Article**
- **No article** is used before a plural noun that refers to people or things in a **general sense**.
 - **The boys** is used when referring to a **known group**.
 - **Boys** is used when referring to **boys in general** - not a specific group of boys - any group of boys. Compare:
 - **The boys** prefer to play inside. (**these boys**)
 - **Boys** like to play outside. (**boys in general**)

USING ARTICLES WITH NON-COUNTABLE NOUNS:

- A/an:**
- **A or an cannot be used** with non-countable nouns, such as water, air, gas, milk, rice, wood, traffic, merchandise, etc.
- No Article:**
- **No article** is used before a non-count noun that refers to things in a **general sense**:
 - **abstract concepts:** liberty, justice, honesty, kindness, life, truth, beauty, luck, sympathy, etc.
 - **areas of study:** history, art, science, economics, psychology, engineering, etc.
 - **sports or activities:** baseball, tennis, reading, golf, yoga, hockey, chess, aerobics, etc.
 - **occupations:** accounting, medicine, carpentry, management, mining, politics, etc.
 - Compare:
 - **Lunch** is always served at one o'clock. / Today we had **a good lunch**.
 - Hamid goes to **school** in Ottawa. / We parked in front of **a school**.
 - She hopes to attend **university** some day. / **The university** has **a new library**.
- The:**
- Use **the** to refer to many **government organizations** or **services** in a general way:
 - Some non-count nouns are also used in a countable, **specific sense**:
 - **The federal government, the army, the police, the civil service, the courts, the cabinet**
 - Use **the** to refer collectively to any **social groups** or **special-interest group**:
 - **the media, the press, the public, the elderly, the unions, the religious**

For more information, contact the Academic Skills Centre (ASC).