

## Articles: Explanation, Examples, and Exceptions

Two types of articles can be placed before a noun: **definite** (*the*) and **indefinite** (*some/a/an*). The use of each article depends on whether specific or general reference is made to any member of a group. **Definite means that *the* refers to some specific thing**, as contrasted with *a* or *an*, which does not refer to one specific noun or plural noun. *The* is used only when referring to a particular thing and may be used to refer to one or many of those things (e.g., ***The Labrador puppy was seen running after the cats.***).

Indefinite articles are *indefinite* because they do not refer specifically to *the* (definite article) particular object being discussed. **An indefinite article refers to an object in a general sense**. Place the word *a* before any noun referring to one item within a type, though not limited to one specific item within the category type (i.e., use *a* for any one dog but not necessarily a specific dog; e.g., ***A dog at the kennel jumped onto my lap.***). Articles in English are invariable, which means they do not change according to the gender or number of the noun to which they refer (e.g., ***the woman, the man, the people, a girl, a boy, the children.***).

### Definite Articles: *The*

- *The* is used before both singular and plural specific nouns that indicate a particular thing or member of a group and may be used to refer to one or many of these things (e.g., ***The teacher indicates one particular teacher. A teacher could refer to any teacher. The dog was seen running after the cats.***)
- *The* is used when the noun cannot be counted (e.g., ***The coffee I had this morning was too sweet. The ink in my pen has run out.***). *The* is not used with non-countable nouns that refer to something in the general sense, unless the noncountable noun is made more specific by a modifying phrase or clause (e.g., ***Coffee is my favorite drink; the coffee that I had this morning was stale.***).

*The* is also used...

1. To refer to something which has already been mentioned (e.g., ***An elephant and a mouse fell in love. The mouse loved the elephant's long trunk, and the elephant loved the mouse's tiny nose.***).
2. When both the speaker and listener know what is being talked about, even if it has not been mentioned before (e.g., ***"Where's the bathroom?" "It's on the first floor."***).
3. To refer to objects we regard as unique (e.g., ***the sun, the moon, the world.***).
4. In sentences or clauses where we define a particular person or object (e.g., ***The man who wrote this book is famous. My house is the one with a blue door.***).
5. Before superlatives and ordinal numbers (e.g., ***the highest building, the first page, the last chapter.***).
6. With named geographical areas and oceans (e.g., ***the Caribbean, the Sahara, the Pacific.***).
7. With decades, or groups of years (e.g., ***She grew up in the seventies.***).

**Definite Article Exceptions:** There is **no** definite article used with...

1. Names of countries, if singular (e.g., *Germany is an important economic power. He's just returned from Zimbabwe. I'm visiting **the** United States next week.*).
2. Names of languages (e.g., *French is spoken in Tahiti. English uses many words of Latin origin. Indonesian is a relatively new language.*).
3. Names of meals (e.g., *Lunch is at midday. Dinner is in the evening. Breakfast is the first meal of the day.*).
4. People's names, if singular (e.g., *John's coming to the party. Alex King is my uncle. We're having lunch with **the** Morgans tomorrow.*).
5. Possessive case before the noun (e.g., *His brother's car. Peter's house.*).
6. Professions (e.g., *Engineering is a useful career. He'll probably go into medicine.*).
7. Titles with names (e.g., *Prince Charles is Queen Elizabeth's son. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Dr. Watson was Sherlock Holmes' friend. **The** Queen of England and **the** Pope appeared in London.*).
8. Names of shops (e.g., *I'll get the card at Smith's. Can you go to Starbucks for me?*).
9. Uncountable nouns (e.g., *Rice is the main food in Asia. Milk is often added to tea in England. War is destructive.*).
10. Years (e.g., *1948 was a wonderful year. Do you remember 2000?*).
11. Names of individual mountains, lakes, and islands (e.g., *Mount McKinley is the highest mountain in Alaska. She lives near Lake Windermere. Have you visited Long Island?*).
12. Most names of towns, streets, stations, and airports (e.g., *Victoria Station is in London. Can you direct me to Bond Street? She lives in Florence. They're flying from Heathrow.*).
13. Some fixed expressions (e.g., *by car, by train, by air, on foot, on holiday, on air* (in broadcasting), *at school, at work, at University, in church, in prison, in bed.*).

## Indefinite Articles: *Some, A, An*

### *Some*

The indefinite word *some* is used for plural general nouns (e.g., some students).

### *A and an*

- The use of *a* and *an* indicates that the noun modified is indefinite (no particular member of a group). They are used when the noun modified is singular and general.
- *A* and *an* are used when the noun can be counted (e.g., *a vehicle, an apple*).
- Place the word *a* in front of any noun referring to one thing within a type but not constrained to one token thing. In other words, use *a* for any one dog but not necessarily that dog (e.g., *A dog jumped onto the chair.*).
- If an amount is referred to (such as *any* or *one*) the *a* is no longer required (e.g., *Any box will do.*).
- *A* precedes singular nouns that begin with a consonant (e.g., *a student*). **Exception #1:** When a singular noun begins with a vowel that sounds like a consonant, *a* is used (*a uniform*; u in uniform sounds like yoo). **Exception #2:** *An* before an h mute (e.g., *an hour, an honor*).
- *An* precedes singular nouns that begin with a vowel (e.g., *an address*).

- When the article and the noun are separated by an adjective, the article that agrees with the initial sound of the adjective is used (e.g., **an** *English student*, **a** *wrong address*).
- Neither *a*, *an*, or *the* should be used when referring to proper names unless it is part of the name (e.g., *George went to Cedar Point*; *Kelly's favorite book is **The** Lion, **the** Witch, and **the** Wardrobe.*).

The Indefinite Article is also used ...

1. To refer to something for the first time (e.g., **An** *elephant and a mouse fell in love.*).
2. To refer to a particular member of a group or class, such as the names of jobs, nationalities, religions, musical instruments and days of the week (e.g., *Emily is **a** doctor. John is **an** Englishman. Sherlock Holmes was playing **a** violin when they came. I was born on **a** Thursday.*).
3. To refer to a “kind of” or “example of” something (e.g., *The mouse had **a** tiny nose. The elephant had **a** long trunk. It was **a** very strange car.*).
4. With singular nouns, after the words “what” and “such” (e.g., *What **a** shame! He's normally such **a** good dog.*).
5. When meaning “one,” referring to a single object or person (e.g., *I'd like **an** orange and two lemons please. The burglar took **a** diamond necklace and **a** valuable painting.*).

## Practice Exercises

Write the correct article (*the, a, an, some*) in the blank. If no article is needed, leave empty.

1. When (1)\_\_\_ we come, (2)\_\_\_ you should be ready to give (3)\_\_\_ presentation.
2. How (4)\_\_\_ many flowers are needed to make (5)\_\_\_ picture complete?
3. (6)\_\_\_ these cones are not as large as (7)\_\_\_ old ones were.
4. In (8)\_\_\_ North, (9)\_\_\_ people like to ride (10)\_\_\_ snow mobiles.
5. (11)\_\_\_ killer whales will not attack (12)\_\_\_ people for (13)\_\_\_ food.
6. Many of (14)\_\_\_ large animals are becoming restless.
7. Why can't (15)\_\_\_ you make (16)\_\_\_ your puppy settle down?
8. If (17)\_\_\_ my paper had not been rejected, (18)\_\_\_ I would be able to go with (19)\_\_\_ you to (20)\_\_\_ finals.
9. (21)\_\_\_ eagle is flying overhead in search of (22)\_\_\_ fish to catch.
10. (23)\_\_\_ Samuel received (24)\_\_\_ these pictures at (25)\_\_\_ beginning of (26)\_\_\_ semester because (27)\_\_\_ his mother likes (28)\_\_\_ flowers.
11. When (29)\_\_\_ cats are young, they do not understand how to retract (30)\_\_\_ their claws to keep from scratching (31)\_\_\_ people.
12. (32)\_\_\_ puppy's baby teeth are sharp, so be careful not to let one bite (33)\_\_\_ your hand.

**Answer Key:** 1. – 2. – 3. the 4. – 5. the 6. – 7. the 8. the 9. some 10. – 11. Some 12. – 13. – 14. the 15. – 16. – 17. – 18. – 19. – 20. the 21. An 22. some 23. – 24. – 25. the 26. the 27. – 28. – 29. – 30. – 31. – 32. A 33. –

*Fill in the blanks with the appropriate articles (**the, a, an, some**) when needed.*

1. (1)\_\_\_\_\_ church on the corner has (2)\_\_\_\_\_ evening service.
2. Lee can speak (3)\_\_\_\_\_ Japanese.
3. I borrowed (4)\_\_\_\_\_ pencil from your desk.
4. John likes to play (5)\_\_\_\_\_ basketball.
5. (6)\_\_\_\_\_ apple (7)\_\_\_\_\_ day keeps (8)\_\_\_\_\_ doctor away.
6. (9)\_\_\_\_\_ ink in my pen has run out.
7. (10)\_\_\_\_\_ neighbors across the street have (11)\_\_\_\_\_ dog.
8. I want (12)\_\_\_\_\_ apples from (13)\_\_\_\_\_ store.
9. I bought (14)\_\_\_\_\_ new umbrella.
10. Christie is learning to play (15)\_\_\_\_\_ piano.

***Answer Key: 1. The 2. an 3. – 4. a 5. – 6. An 7. a 8. the 9. The 10. The 11. a 12. some 13. the 14. a 15. the***