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.

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.