

Articles



What are articles? How do they function in sentences?

In English, we use two categories of articles to modify nouns. These articles “modify” nouns by telling us specific things about those nouns:

The definite article (*the*) is used for particular or specific nouns.

- “Mom said that *the* car is in our parking spot.” In this case, Mom is referring to a specific car, most likely the car that belongs to us.

The indefinite article (*a/an*) is used for singular, non-count, non-particular nouns.

- “Mom said that *a* car is in our driveway.” In this case, the use of the indefinite article implies either that we don’t know, or it doesn’t matter, which car or whose car is in our driveway.

An or A?: To choose whether to use *a* or *an*, look to the following word; if the next word begins with a vowel sound, use *an*—if it begins with a consonant sound, use *a*. There is *an* open door in the house/There is *a* door in the house.

How do writers use articles?

To recap, *the* refers to specific nouns while *a/an* refer to general nouns. Sometimes you may introduce a noun in a general sense and then refer to that noun specifically.

- “You will need *a* screwdriver to replace the part. *The* screwdriver should have a flathead.” This shows how you can move from referencing a noun generally to referencing a noun specifically because the noun had been previously mentioned.

Articles

Generally you should consider whether the noun can be “counted” or “not-counted.” Count nouns do not need an indefinite article. You can distinguish between count and non-count nouns simply by thinking about whether you could put a number on that noun.

- For example, if you were looking at a lake, you wouldn’t be able to say that there are “four hundred waters” in that lake. If you’re talking about a specific body of water, however, you would still use the definite article: “Look at the water in the lake.”

Sometimes, we can get confused by whether a phrase is plural or not.

- Take the incomplete phrase “stack of papers.” While in a literal sense, we are talking about multiple papers, technically we are discussing *one* stack. In this case, then, if we were referring to an non-particular stack of papers, we would still use the indefinite article because we are discussing one stack.

What instances are articles NOT needed?

Proper nouns that refer to cities, streets, individuals, or languages.

- John, Chicago, Japanese

Names of countries, unless the name is plural.

- Nepal, Norway
- The Netherlands, The United States

A non-count noun when that noun refers to a thing in general.

- I like coffee (when you are talking about coffee in general).
- I like the coffee (when you are referring to the coffee you are drinking or to a specific brand’s or store’s coffee).

A noun that refers to a generic non-count noun.

- Honesty is the best policy.
- Rice is the most common food.