

The Articles

Articles: The three articles — *a*, *an*, *the* — are [adjectives](#). *The* is called the **definite article** because it names, specifically, a [noun](#); *a* and *an* are called **indefinite articles** because they don't. These words are also called **noun markers** or **determiners** because they are followed by a noun.

CAUTION! Even after you learn all the principles behind the use of these articles, you will find an abundance of situations where choosing the correct article or choosing whether to use one or not will prove chancy. Icy highways are dangerous. *The icy highways are dangerous.* *And both are correct.*



The is used with specific nouns. *The* is required when the noun it accompanies refers to something that is one of a kind:

The moon circles the earth.

The is required when the noun it accompanies refers to something in the abstract:

The United States has encouraged the use of the private automobile as opposed to the use of public transit.

The is required when the noun it accompanies refers to something named earlier in the text. (See [below](#).)

We use *a* before singular count-nouns that begin with consonants (a cow, a barn, a sheep); we use *an* before singular count-nouns that begin with vowels or vowel-like sounds (an apple, an urban blight, an open door). Words that begin with an *h* sound often require an *a* (as in a horse, a history book, a hotel), but if an *h*-word begins with an actual vowel sound, use an *an* (as in an hour, an honor). We would say a useful device and a union matter because the *u* of those words actually sounds like *yoo* (as opposed to the *u* of an ugly incident). We would say a once-in-a-lifetime experience or a one-time hero because the words *once* and *one* begin with a *w* sound (as if they were spelled *wuntz* and *won*).

Webster's Dictionary says that we can use *an* before an *h*-word that begins with an unstressed syllable. Thus, we might say an hisTORical moment, but we would say a HIStory book. Many writers would call that an affectation and prefer that we say a historical, but apparently, this choice is a matter of personal taste.

First and subsequent reference: When we first refer to something in written text, we often use an indefinite article to modify it.

A newspaper has an obligation to seek out and tell the truth.

In a subsequent reference to this newspaper, however, we will use the definite article:

There are situations, however, when the newspaper must determine whether the public's safety is jeopardized by knowing the truth.

Another example:

"I'd like a glass of orange juice, please," John said.

"I put the glass of juice on the counter already," Shiela replied.

Exception:

When a modifier appears between the article and the noun, the subsequent article will continue to be indefinite:

"I'd like a big glass of orange juice, please," John said.

"I put a big glass of juice on the counter already," Shiela replied.

Generic reference: We can refer to something in a generic way by using any of the three articles. We can do the same thing by omitting the article altogether.

- A beagle makes a great hunting dog and family companion.
- An airedale is sometimes a rather skittish animal.
- The golden retriever is a marvelous pet for children.
- Irish setters are not the highly intelligent animals they used to be.

The difference between the generic indefinite pronoun and the normal indefinite pronoun is that the latter refers to any of that class ("I want to buy a beagle, and any old beagle will do.") whereas the former (see beagle sentence) refers to all members of that class.

Proper nouns: We use the definite article with certain kinds of proper nouns:

- Geographical places: the Sound, the Sea of Japan, the Mississippi, the West, the Smokies, the Sahara (but often *not* when the main part of the proper noun seems to be modified by an earlier attributive noun or adjective: We went swimming at ~~the~~ Ocean Park)
- Pluralized names (geographic, family, teams): the Netherlands, the Bahamas, the Hamptons, the Johnsons, the New England Patriots
- Public institutions/facilities/groups: the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Sheraton, the House, the Presbyterian Church
- Newspapers: the *Hartford Courant*, the *Times*
- Nouns followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with "of": the leader of the gang, the president of our club

Zero articles: Several kinds of nouns never use articles. We do not use articles with the names of languages ("He was learning Chinese." [But when the word Chinese refers to the people, the definite article might come into play: "The Chinese are hoping to get the next Olympics."]), the names of sports

("She plays badminton and basketball."), and academic subjects ("She's taking economics and math. Her major is Religious Studies.")

When they are generic, non-count nouns and sometimes plural count-nouns are used without articles. "We like *wine* with our dinner. We adore Baroque *music*. We use *roses* for many purposes." But if an "of phrase" comes after the noun, we use an article: "We adore the music of the Baroque." Also when a generic noun is used without an article and then referred to in a subsequent reference, it will have become specific and will require a definite article: "The Data Center installed computers in the Learning Center this summer. The computers, unfortunately, don't work.