

Grammar Practice: Articles

When do we use an indefinite article?

Indefinite articles *a* and *an* are used to describe someone or something that is unfamiliar to you or that does not need to be specified. *A* is used before nouns that begin with a consonant sound; *an* is used before nouns that start with a vowel sound (this applies to sounds, not letters).

a b anana	an a pple
a h ouse	an h onest opinion
a u nicorn	an u prising

The indefinite articles *a* and *an* are used only before singular count nouns that are not specific or are mentioned for the first time. **Count nouns** are things we can count (i.e., pen, movie, accident, etc.). Count nouns can be singular (pen) or plural (pens). You can use *a/an* before singular count nouns but not before plural count nouns.

✓ There's a b each near here.
✗ There are a beaches near here.
✓ Do you have a t en-dollar bill?
✗ Do you have a ten-dollar bills?

Noncount nouns are things we cannot count. They are always singular. *A/an* is not used before noncount nouns. However, you can often use an “*a __ of*” structure.

✗ a water	✗ a music
✓ a drop of water	✓ a piece of music
✗ a tennis	✗ a sugar in my tea
✓ a game of tennis	✓ a pinch of sugar in my tea

When do we use a definite article?

The English **definite article** is *the*. *The* is used before nouns to indicate that the specific identity of that noun is already known or is about to be specified. There are several different situations in which we use the definite article *the*.

- Use *the* when you are talking about something specific.

We all have a n umbrella to bring today. (<i>general</i>)
The umbrella I brought won't open. (<i>specific</i>)

- Use *the* when the speaker and the listener are talking about the same specific items.

We have a pretty big refrigerator. (<i>general</i>)
William, don't forget to close the refrigerator! (<i>specific</i>)

- Use *the* once you've already referenced the noun a first time. After the first mention, the noun is no longer general because it has been specified.

Juju and I bought a **new computer** last month. (*first reference*)
The computer lets us work from home. (*second reference*)

- Use *the* with the superlative form of an adjective, before *most* + *adjective* or before an adjective that ends in *-est*.

Diamond rings are **the most** expensive items in this store.
 My sister is **the smartest** girl in town.

- Use *the* before the names of countries that look plural, including countries that end in *-s* or have the words *united*, *union*, *republic*, or *kingdom*.

✓ the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	✗ the Australia
✓ the United States	✗ the Iran
✓ the Dominican Republic	✗ the China

- Use *the* before most bodies of water, except individual lakes.

✓ the Mississippi River	✗ the Lake Michigan
✓ the Great Lakes	✗ the Crater Lake

- Use *the* before geographic parts of the globe and geographic areas, deserts, and peninsulas.

the equator	the Gobi Desert
the Middle East	the South

When do we not need articles?

Placing *a*, *an*, or *the* before a noun is not always necessary. There are a few situations in which we do not use any articles.

- Do not use articles when you talk about a category or group in general.

Cats can be great pets. (*general*)
The cats in the pet store are expensive. (*specific*)

- Do not use articles before abstract nouns, such as feelings or ideas.

✓ A person's success depends on **opportunity**.
 ✗ A person's success depends on the opportunity.

✓ **Kindness** is the greatest virtue.
 ✗ The kindness is the greatest virtue.

- Do not use articles before names of general meals.

What time is **dinner**? (*general*)
 What time is **the dinner** outing tonight? (*specific*)
 We had **lunch** at a very nice restaurant. (*general*)
 We had **a lunch** date yesterday. (*specific*)

- Do not use articles before *noun + number*.

✓ Our plane leaves from Gate 10.
 ✗ Our plane leaves from the Gate 10.

Practice

Exercise 1. Fill in the blanks with the correct definite article (*the*) or indefinite article (*a/an*).

1. I took _____ taxi to the train station.
2. Does he know _____ man on the corner?
3. She has _____ secret to tell you.
4. Is there _____ bank near here?
5. Did you see _____ accident?
6. I can't find _____ keys.

Exercise 2. Circle the correct noun or article + noun in the underlined parts of these sentences.

1. If you want to know the news, you can read paper/a paper.
2. Light/A light comes from the sun.
3. I was in a hurry this morning. I didn't have time/a time for breakfast.
4. It's very difficult to find job/a job at the moment.
5. We had wonderful time/a wonderful time on vacation.

Exercise 3. Add the *where* necessary. If the noun doesn't need the indefinite article, leave the space empty.

1. I haven't been to _____ movies for ages.
2. _____ TV was on, but nobody was watching it.
3. You'll find _____ information you need at _____ top of _____ page 15.
4. Have you had _____ dinner yet?
5. I always say that _____ protein bars are _____ best snacks.

Exercise 4. Describe the change in meaning when the definite or indefinite article is used.

1. Did you buy a Ford or (a/the) Chevy?
2. Once I started coughing, I went to (the/a) doctor.
3. (The/A) sun is a star.