



# Academic Center

Tutoring and Testing at UHV.

## "A, An or The?"

### Understanding Articles

The words **a**, **an**, and **the** are called articles, also known as determiners. These words are used to signal that a noun will follow: they are noun markers. They may be followed immediately by a noun (the ball ) or be separated from the noun by one or more adjectives (the big ball, the big red ball).

Sometimes these little words can cause a lot of confusion! Since some languages don't use articles, whereas others use an article for every noun, it can get rather tricky deciding when to use or what to use. Here are a few rules you must keep in mind to better understand the appropriate use of these words.

Articles are classified as either indefinite or definite.

*A* and *an* are called indefinite articles and *the* is called the definite article.

Indefinite	Definite
a cat (any cat)	the cat (any specific cat, the cat in the tree)
A magazine (any magazine)	the magazine (the magazine on the shelf)

### Indefinite Articles: *a* and *an*

*Indefinite* means that the modified noun refers to **any** member of a group.

The rules for which article, *a* or *an*, to use in a given situation follow:

- **"A"** is used before any word that begins with a consonant whether the word is a noun or an adjective.  
Examples: *a* field trip, *a* trip to the park, *a* joyful ride
- **"An"** is used before any word that begins with a vowel whether the word is a noun or an adjective.  
Examples: *an* elephant, *an* apple, *an* eventful evening

**NOTE: The rules above are true in most cases, but there are a few exceptions.**



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### A Few Exceptions:

- Use **an** before unsounded **h**.  
Examples: **an** honest mistake, **an** honorable award
- Use **an** when discussing all vowels except u and consonants f, h, l, m, n, r, s, and x.  
Example: Mary's name begins with **an** M.
- Use **a** when **u** makes the same sound as the **y** in you.  
Examples: **a** unit, **a** unicorn, **a** U.S. citizen

Indefinite articles are also used to show membership in a profession, nation, or religion.

- Lin is *a* doctor.
- Fred is *an* American.
- Juan is *a* Catholic.

### Definite Article: *the*

The definite article *the* is used when referring to a **particular member** of a group. *The* is acceptable before both singular and plural nouns.

The rules are

- Specific nouns are preceded by *the*.  
Examples: *The* pizza I ate last night gave me *an* upset stomach. (specific pizza)  
*The* errors in *the* article were minor. (specific errors)
- Nouns that refer to something unique are preceded by *the*.  
Examples: *the* laws of gravity  
*the* White House  
*the* Department of Transportation

#### Note:

When a noun refers to a particular class or group, or a specific member of a class or group, *the* can be used to modify both correctly.

#### Example 1:

Erik Erikson studied the development and growth of *the* human being.  
In this case we are referring to the class of human beings.

#### Example 2:

She is *the* only human being that I know who eats pickles with ice cream.  
In this case we are referring to she, who is the only human being, rather than a class.

### Exceptions: No Articles

- Common uncountable (noun cannot be counted) nouns are not preceded by an article.  
Examples: Pizza is Sara's favorite food. (all sorts of pizza, can't be counted)  
  
Creativity is essential for advertising. (all sorts of creativity, can't be counted)



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- Common countable (noun can be counted) **plural** nouns are not preceded by an article.

Examples: Errors are often known as mistakes. (all errors)  
Tigers are fearful animals. (all tigers)

	Example	Meaning
Noncount Noun	Creativity is essential for advertising.	All sorts of creativity
Plural Count Noun	Tigers are fearful animals.	All tigers

- Common count nouns are used without articles in certain special situations:

Idiomatic expressions (see handout on idioms for further explanation)	We'll go by bus.
	He must be in school.
With seasons	In spring, the flowers bloom.
With institutions	John is in college/church/jail/class/school
With meals	Breakfast was at 9:00 am.
	Cyndi made dinner for Jimmy.
With diseases	He has cancer.
	I have pneumonia.
With time of day	They like to travel mostly by night.
	We should get there around midnight.

#### Geographical uses of *the* include:

- Geographical areas (*the* Middle East, *the* South)
- Deserts, forests, gulfs and peninsulas (*the* Sahara, *the* Persian Gulf)
- Names of rivers, oceans, and seas (*the* Nile, *the* Atlantic)
- Points on the globe (*the* Equator, *the* South Pole)

#### Do Not use *the* before:

- Names of countries (England, Mexico, China)  
**Except:** *the* Netherlands, *the* United States, *the* Republic of China
- Names of cities, towns, or states (Victoria, Houston)
- Names of streets (Red River, Navarro)
- Names of individual lakes and bays (Lake Austin, Lake Erie)  
**Except:** groups of lakes like *the* Great Lakes
- Names of individual mountains (Mount Everest, Mount Rushmore)  
**Except:** ranges of mountains (*the* Andes or *the* Rockies)
- Names of continents (North America, Asia)
- Names of individual islands (Fiji Island, Maui)  
**Except:** island chains (*the* Canary Islands)

#### Do not use any articles before.....

- Names of languages (Chinese, English, Spanish)
- Names of sports (basketball, softball, baseball)
- Names of academic subjects (history, biology, mathematics)



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**Note: First and Subsequent use**

*A* or *an* can be used to introduce a noun for the first time within a piece of writing. *The* is used after the initial mention of the noun each time you refer to that particular noun.

**Example:** *A* company softball tournament is scheduled for next weekend. The winners of *the* tournament will be awarded \$500.00.

**CAUTION!!**

Remember that even though you might know all the rules and principles behind the use of articles, there will be situations when selecting the right article or deciding whether or not even to use one will prove to be risky. How the reader approaches the text (situational or contextual) can also become a factor in the meaning and appropriate word choice or in this case, article choice. The key to becoming a wiz when choosing and knowing the correct use of articles is to practice, practice, practice!!



**Your Turn:**

Now it is your turn to put your knowledge to work.

See exercises 1, 2, and 3 that relate to using articles.

Exercise 1: Filling In with Articles

Exercise 2: Understanding Articles

Exercise 3: Writing With Articles

For more information and exercises on articles, visit the following websites:

<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/determiners/determiners.htm>

[http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/8012/quizzes/Grammar\\_Goblins/GGdeterminers.html](http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/8012/quizzes/Grammar_Goblins/GGdeterminers.html)

<http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/writing/on-line/choosing-the-right-article.html>

<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/marshallf/cours110Q/determiners.htm>

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