

An article is a word that determines if a noun is specific or unspecific. In English, there are three articles: *a*, *an*, and *the*. The article you use depends on which kind of noun you are using and the situation.

Using A/An

If you use *a* or *an*, it means that the noun that follows is not specific: it does not have an identity for the reader. *A* and *an* are like the word *one*: they only appear before singular nouns that can be counted (e.g. a horse, an accident).

If the word immediately after the article begins with a consonant sound, use *a*.

e.g. She went to the Humane Society to adopt a cat.

If the word immediately after the article begins with a vowel sound (e.g. even if it starts with a *h* that you don't really pronounce), use *an*.

e.g. An icicle fell off the garage roof.

e.g. An hour had passed, and still there was no sign of him.

Using The

The is used for nouns that are specific. This means these nouns have an established identity: they are familiar to the reader either because they are unique in some way, or because the author/speaker has already mentioned them, or because it is obvious which thing is being referred to.

e.g. The textbook for my Intro to Psychology course costs \$110. (We know which textbook it is because there is a prepositional phrase afterward, "for my Intro to Psychology course," that specifies which one.)

e.g. Angkor Wat is the largest religious site ever built. (This place has set a world record, so it is exclusive: so there can only be one.)

e.g. "Can you answer the phone, please?" (In this case, there is one specific phone ringing in the vicinity of the speaker and listener, so it is clear which phone is being discussed.)

e.g. The second step in the application screening is the in-person interview ().

The can be used with nouns that can be counted and are singular (i.e. there is only one).

e.g. The icicle shattered when it hit the ground.

e.g. The time machine appeared to be broken.

Unlike *a/an*, *the* can also be used with plural nouns that can be counted (i.e. there is more than one).

e.g. The books were returned late to the library.

The can also be used with uncountable nouns. An uncountable noun cannot be expressed as a plural (i.e. weather, money, and sugar), and is often abstract.

e.g. Could you pass the salt please?

e.g. I want the truth!

The is **not** usually used with proper nouns.

e.g. I am attending ~~the~~ St. Thomas University.

However, there are some exceptions. Most of these exceptions are for boat names (e.g. the Queen Mary 2); geographic locations like oceans (the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean), mountain ranges (the Rocky Mountains), regions (the Prairies), rivers (the Amazon), and some countries (the United States, the Philippines).

Practice Exercises

If an article is needed, choose *a*, *an* or *the*. If no article is needed, use ∅.

- ___ helium is a type of ___ gas.
- ___ chicken I ordered at ___ new restaurant on ___ Regent Street was delicious!
- Lauren is wearing ___ skirt today. She likes to wear ___ skirts.
- Why don't you ever pick up ___ phone when I call? Is there ___ problem with it? If so, you should get ___ new phone.
- ___ dead bodies of ___ eight right whales were found in Atlantic Canada last summer. ___ biologists have not yet determined ___ cause of death.
- I dropped ___ bottle on the floor. Now ___ glass from ___ bottle is everywhere and I have ___ cut on my foot.
- Frederick Banting is ___ person who first discovered insulin. He was ___ Canadian physician who lived in ___ London, Ontario. He started to research the pancreas, ___ organ in the body that produces insulin. His discoveries led to ___ new treatments for diabetes.
- Everyone has ___ problems with ___ writing.
- I received ___ letter in the mail! ___ letter is from ___ friend who lives in Portland, Oregon.
- My grandmother's basement is full of ___ junk.
- ___ fruit contains ___ natural sugar called fructose.
- I ate ___ apple and ___ sandwich for lunch.
- ___ French used to be ___ primary language of international diplomacy.

Answer Key

1. ∅ ... ∅ 2. The ... the ... ∅ 3. a ... ∅ 4. the ... a ... a 5. The ... ∅ ... ∅ ... the 6. a ... ∅ or the ... the ... a 7. the ... a ... ∅ ... an ... ∅ 8. ∅ ... ∅ 9. a ... the ... a 10. ∅ 11. ∅ ... a or ∅ 12. an ... a 13. ∅ ... the