

ARTICLES

What is an article?

An article modifies a noun. English has two articles: **the** and **a/an**.

The is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; **a/an** is used to modify non-specific or non-particular nouns.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article

For example, if I say, "Let's read **the** book," I mean a *specific* book. If I say, "Let's read **a** book," I mean *any* book rather than a specific book.

Indefinite Article: a/an

"A/an" is used to refer to a *non-specific* or *non-particular* member of the group. For example, "I would like to go see **a** movie." Here, we're not talking about a *specific* movie. We're talking about *any* movie. There are many movies, and I want to see *any* movie. I don't have a specific one in mind.

Examples:

- "My daughter really wants **a** dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog. We don't know which dog because we haven't found the dog yet.
- "Somebody call **a** policeman!" This refers to *any* policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.
- "When I was at the zoo, I saw **an** elephant!" Here, we're talking about a single, non-specific thing, in this case an elephant. There are probably several elephants at the zoo, but there's only *one* we're talking about here.

Definite Article: the

The is used to refer to a *specific* or *particular* member of a group. For example, "I just saw **the** most popular movie of the year." There are many movies, but only one particular movie is the most popular. Therefore, we use **the**.

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. **The** signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group.

Examples:

- “**The** dog that bit me ran away.” Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.
- “I was happy to see **the** policeman who saved my cat!” Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.
- “I saw **the** elephant at the zoo.” Here, we're talking about a *specific* noun. Probably there is only one elephant at the zoo. ¹

Proper Names

English **does not** use an article with proper names (names of persons, cities, countries, states)

Exceptions occur in the following cases:

- Names of rivers (The Mississippi is our longest river.)
- Names of mountain ranges (The Alps are in Switzerland and Austria.)
- Oceans (The Pacific is the largest ocean.)
- Names of some countries which include "the" in the title (the United States, the Netherlands, the Republic of Venezuela, the Congo)

In cases **where specificity is indicated, the article may be used even with proper names** with which it is not normally used:

Examples:

- I know two girls named Mary Jones: the Mary Jones in my History class has blond hair.
- The state of Maine has a town called Paris, named after the Paris in France.

When surnames are used in the **plural** to denote **a family, *the* is required:**

Example: The Browns are our neighbors.

Names of Languages/National Groups

Names of languages follow the general rule for proper names: no article, unless they precede the word language, in which case they function as adjectives and the rule does

not apply.

Examples: English is a difficult language. The English language is a difficult language.

Words denoting the people of a particular nation often coincide with the name of the language spoken there. When these words have a singular form (German, Germans; Italian, Italians), the singular form is used without the article for the language, while the plural form, with or without the article, refers to the people. However, certain nationality words ending in sibilant sounds (such as French, English, and Spanish) have no plural forms. Therefore, the use of the word without the article for the language is normal, while the use of the article is mandatory when referring to the people.

Examples:

- Italian is a musical language. (The) Italians are friendly people.
- The French are known for their love of good food. French is a difficult language to learn.

Sports/Games/Musical Instruments

Articles are not used with names of sports and games (John likes to play football). With the names of musical instruments the article may be used or omitted: do you play (the) piano?

When any of the terms for sports, games, or musical instruments are used before another noun (used as adjectives), the basic rule applies: I went to the football game; let's sit on the piano bench.

Fixed Expressions

The article is omitted in certain fixed expressions such as: go to school, go to church, go to bed, stay in bed. These expressions refer to attending the specific activities which are typical for these locations. It is possible to use go to the school, go to the church, when reference is to the building rather than the function.

Example: We go to church every Sunday. On Thursdays I go to the church for choir practice.

¹ Source: "How to Use Articles (a/an/the)". The Writing Lab & The OWL at Purdue. Purdue University. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/>