ARTICLES

The definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a* and *an* signal that a noun is about to appear. The noun may follow the article immediately or modifiers may intervene.

the cat, the black cat; a sunset, a spectacular sunset; an apple, an appetizing apple

When to use *a* (or *an*). Use *a* or *an* with singular count nouns whose specific identity is not known to the reader. Count nouns refer to persons, places, or thing that can be counted: one girl, two girls; one city, three cities.

Mary Beth arrived in $^{a}_{\wedge}$ limousine.

We are looking for $^{an}_{\wedge}$ apartment close to the lake.

A (or *an*) usually means "one among many" but can also mean "any one."

NOTE: *A* is used before a consonant sound: a banana, a happy child. *An* is used before a vowel sound: an eggplant, an honorable person.

When not to use *a* (or *an*). *A* (or *an)* is not used to mark noncount nouns. Noncount nouns refer to entities or abstractions that cannot be counted: water, silver, sugar, furniture, patience. (See below for a fuller list.)

Claudia asked her mother for (~~*an)*~~ advice.

If you want to express an amount of something designated by a noncount noun, you can often add a quantifier in front of it: a quart of milk, an ounce of gold, a piece of furniture.

NOTE: A few noncount nouns may also be used as count nouns:

Bill loves lemonade; Bill offered me a lemonade.

COMMONLY USED NONCOUNT NOUNS

Food and drink: bread, butter, candy, celery, cereal, cheese, chicken, chocolate, coffee, fish, flour, fruit, lemonade, lettuce, meat, milk, oil, pasta, rice, salt, sugar, tea, water

Nonfood substances: air, gasoline, gold, paper, rain, wood

Abstract nouns: advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, fun, happiness, honesty, intelligence, knowledge, love, truth

Other: biology, clothing, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, traffic, weather, work

When to use *the*. Use the definite article *the* with most nouns whose specific identity is known to the reader. Usually the identity will be clear for one of these reasons:

1. The noun has been previously mentioned.
2. A word group following the noun restricts its identity.
3. The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear.

A truck loaded with chickens cut in front of our van.

When *the* truck skidded a few seconds later, we almost plowed into it.

The noun *truck* is preceded by *A* when it is first mentioned. When the noun is mentioned again, it is preceded by *the* since readers now know the specific truck being discussed.

Bob warned me that *the* cups on the top shelf of the cupboard were about to fall.

The phrase "on the top shelf of the cupboard" identifies the specific cups.

Please don't slam *the* ∧ door when you leave.

Both the speaker and the listener know which door is meant.

When not to use *the*. Do not use *the* with plural on noncount nouns meaning "all" or "in general."

~~(*The*)~~ F(~~f~~)ountains are an expensive element of landscape design.

In some parts of the world, (~~*the*~~) rice is preferred to all other grains.

Although there are many exceptions, do not use *the* with most singular proper nouns: names of persons; names of streets, squares, parks, cities, and states; names of continents and most countries; names of bays and single lakes, mountains, and islands.

Exceptions to this rule include names of large regions, deserts, peninsulas, as well as names of oceans, seas, gulfs, canals, and rivers.

NOTE: *The* is used to mark plural proper nouns such as the United Nations, the Finger Lakes, the Andes, the Bahamas, etc.

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