

Articles – A, An, The

“A/an” and “The” are the two types of English articles. There are rules to help you decide which one to use, but first, you need to know what type of noun you are using. Articles in English are complicated, and there are many rules for their use. However, learning a few general rules about the use of the articles is helpful; the logic of these rules can be transferred to most uses of the article. In addition to learning the rules, you can gain a good working use of the articles through reading and listening.

Table of Articles

NUMBER	INDEFINITE	DEFINITE
Singular	a /an	the
Plural	Nothing	the
Non-Count	Nothing	the

Rule 1

When you have a single, countable English noun, you must always have an article before it. We cannot say “please pass me pen”, we must say “please pass me the pen” or “please pass me a pen” or “please pass me your pen”.

Nouns in English can also be uncountable. Uncountable nouns can be concepts, such as ‘life’, ‘happiness’ and so on, or materials and substances, such as ‘coffee’, or ‘wood’.

Rule 2

Uncountable nouns don’t use ‘a’ or ‘an’. This is because you can’t count them. For example, advice is an uncountable noun. You can’t say “he gave me an advice”, but you can say “he gave me some advice”, or “he gave me a piece of advice”.

Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable. For example, we say “coffee” meaning the product, but we say “a coffee” when asking for one cup of coffee.

Rule 3

You can use ‘the’ to make general things specific. You can use ‘the’ with any type of noun – plural or singular, countable or uncountable.

“Please pass me a pen” – any pen.

“Please pass me the pen” – the one that we can both see.

“Children grow up quickly” – children in general.

“The children I know grow up quickly” – not all children, just the ones I know.

“Poetry can be beautiful”- poetry in general.

“The poetry of Hopkins is beautiful” – I’m only talking about the poetry Hopkins wrote.

More uses of English articles

Here are some more rules for when we use English articles “a/an” and “the” – or when we omit the article:

Rivers, mountain ranges, seas, oceans and geographic areas all use ‘the’.

For example, “The Thames”, “The Alps”, “The Atlantic Ocean”, “The Middle East”.

Unique things have ‘the’.

For example, “the sun”, “the moon”.

Some institutional buildings don’t have an article if you visit them for the reason these buildings exist. But if you go to the building for another reason, you must use ‘the’.

“Her husband is in prison.” (He’s a prisoner.)

“She goes to the prison to see him once a month.”

“My son is in school.” (He’s a student.)

“I’m going to the school to see the head master.”

“She’s in hospital at the moment.” (She’s ill.)

“Her husband goes to the hospital to see her every afternoon.”

Musical instruments use ‘the’.

“She plays the piano.”

Sports don't have an article.
"He plays football."

Illnesses don't have an article.
"He's got appendicitis."
But we say "a cold" and "a headache".

Jobs use 'a'.
"I'm a teacher."

Countries

We don't use 'a' if the country is singular. "He lives in England." But if the country's name has a "plural" meaning, we use 'the'. "The People's Republic of China", "The Netherlands", "The United States of America".

Continents, towns and streets don't have an article.
"Africa", "New York", "Church Street".

Theatres, cinemas and hotels have 'the'.
"The Odeon", "The Almeida", "The Hilton".

Abbreviations use 'the'.
"the UN", "the USA", "the IMF".

We use 'the' before classes of people.
"the rich", "the poor", "the British".

Omission of Articles

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

Names of languages and nationalities: Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian
(unless you are referring to the population of the nation: "The Spanish are known for their warm hospitality.")

Names of sports: volleyball, hockey, baseball

Names of academic subjects: mathematics, biology, history, computer science

A) Complete the following exercise with a / an or the articles. Put "x" where no article is needed.

According to----- National Weather Service,----- cyclones are----- areas of circulating winds that rotate counterclockwise in----- Northern Hemisphere and clockwise in ----- Southern Hemisphere. They are generally accompanied by some kind of ----- precipitation and by----- stormy weather.----- tornadoes and hurricanes are ----- types of cyclones, as are----- typhoons, which are----- storms that occur in ----- western Pacific Ocean. ----- hurricane is----- cyclone that forms over ---- tropical oceans and seas and has----- winds of at least seventy-four miles----- hour. ----- hurricane rotates in shape of----- oval or circle. hurricanes can cause ----- great environmental damage. Hurricane Andrew, which hit ----- coasts of Louisiana and southern Florida in August 1992, caused ----- extreme devastation. In terms of environmental damage,----- Hurricane Andrew is one of---- most devastating hurricanes ever to hit ----- United States. Fourteen people died because of----- Andrew's effects.