Definite and Indefinite Articles

What is an article?

Basically, an article is an adjective. Like adjectives, articles modify nouns.

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. We call the the definite article and a/an the indefinite article.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article


Here's another way to explain it: 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.

"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.

Let's look at each kind of article a little more closely.

Indefinite Articles: a and an

"A" and "an" signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to any member of a group. For example:

- "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
Remember, using a or an depends on the sound that begins the next word. So...

- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant: *a boy; a car; a bike; a zoo; a dog*
- **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: *an elephant; an egg; an apple; an idiot; an orphan*
- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: *a user (sounds like 'yoo-zer,' i.e. begins with a consonant 'y' sound, so 'a' is used); a university; a unicycle*
- In some cases where "h" is pronounced, such as "historical," use **an**:

An historical event is worth recording.

**In writing, "a historical event" is more commonly used.**

Remember that this rule also applies when you use acronyms:

Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICaP) handles first-year writing at the University.

Therefore, an ICaP memo generally discusses issues concerning English 106 instructors.

Another case where this rule applies is when acronyms start with consonant letters but have vowel sounds:

An MSDS (material safety data sheet) was used to record the data. An SPCC plan (Spill Prevention Control and Countermeasures plan) will help us prepare for the worst.

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between **a** and **an** depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

- **a** broken egg
- **an** unusual problem
- **a** European country (sounds like 'yer-o-pi-an,' i.e. begins with consonant 'y' sound)
Remember, too, that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a group:

- I am a teacher. (I am a member of a large group known as teachers.)
- Brian is an Irishman. (Brian is a member of the people known as Irish.)
- Seiko is a practicing Buddhist. (Seiko is a member of the group of people known as Buddhists.)

**Definite Article: 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. For example:

"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.

**Count and Noncount Nouns**

*The* can be used with noncount nouns, or the article can be omitted entirely.

- "I love to sail over the water" (some specific body of water) or "I love to sail over water" (any water).
- "He spilled the milk all over the floor" (some specific milk, perhaps the milk you bought earlier that day) or "He spilled milk all over the floor" (any milk).

"A/an" can be used only with count nouns.

- "I need a bottle of water."
- "I need a new glass of milk."

Most of the time, you can’t say, "She wants a water," unless you’re implying, say, a bottle of water.
Geographical use of the

There are some specific rules for using the with geographical nouns.

Do not use the before:

- names of most countries/territories: Italy, Mexico, Bolivia; however, the Netherlands, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, the United States
- names of cities, towns, or states: Seoul, Manitoba, Miami
- names of streets: Washington Blvd., Main St.
- names of lakes and bays: Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie except with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes
- names of mountains: Mount Everest, Mount Fuji except with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Rockies or unusual names like the Matterhorn
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West) except with island chains like the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or the Canary Islands

Do use the before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas: the Nile, the Pacific
- points on the globe: the Equator, the North Pole
- geographical areas: the Middle East, the West
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula

Omission of Articles

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ELCS 102

Level 5- Grammar

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 academic subjects: mathematics, biology, history, computer science

- Names of sports: football, hockey, baseball

Exercises

Exercises (A)

Fill in the gaps with the correct article (a, an, the, 0) when necessary.

I am from Winchester, Hampshire. Winchester is ______ city in _____ United Kingdom. I live in _____ town called _____ Taunton which is on ______ River Tone. I live in ____ house in ______ quiet street in _____ countryside. _____ street is called “Hudson Street” and ______ house is more than 100 years old! I am ____ English lecturer at _____ college near _____ center of _____ town. I like ______ books, music and taking ______ photographs. I usually have ______ lunch at college. I usually go --____home____ by____ car. We have all kinds of food in ______ England. I like ______ Polish food very much. Sometimes, I go to _____ Polish restaurant in Bath. _____ restaurant is called “Magda’s”. ______ Polish food is delicious.

Exercise (2)

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Level 5- Grammar

1. Robert and Jessica went to ____ party last night.
2. Can you tell me how to get to ____ cinema from here?
3. ____ college is closed today.
4. Gregory is one of ____ strangest people I know.
5. I recommend you try ____ tomato soup at this restaurant.
6. ____ beer is not good for you.
7. Would you like to see ____ film?
8. ____ apple a day keeps ____ doctor away.
9. I can't believe I failed ____ yesterday's test!
10. Do you have ____ dictionary that I can borrow?
11. There were many dogs in the park. One dog was ____ Dalmatian.
12. Pandas and ____ tigers are both endangered animals.
13. Magda is wearing ____ blue dress with red shoes
15. Christmas comes once ____ year.
16. ____ owl is ____ bird.
17. The Severn is ____ river.
18. Jane went to the shop to buy ____ bread.
19. Hania broke ____ glass when she was washing-up.

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20. Tom took ___ umbrella as it was raining heavily.

21. This is ___ easy question.

22. Stephen could you speak ___ little louder.

23. May I have your ___ phone number?

24. I have never seen ___ UFO.

25. May I ask you ___ question?

25. Ismail is ___ best teacher in our school.

26. What is ___ name of the next station?

27. My friend has ___ my car today.

28. I went to ___ sea during my summer holiday.

29. Is there ___ cash machine near here?
Answer Key

Exercise (1)

I am from Winchester, Hampshire. Winchester is ___a___ city in ___the___ United Kingdom. I live in ___a___ town called ___o___ Taunton which is on ___the____ River Tone. I live in ___a___ house in ___a___ quiet street in ___the___ countryside. ___The_ street is called “Hudson Street” and ___the___ house is more than 100 years old! I am ___an___ English lecturer at ___a___ college near ___the___ center of ___the___ town. I like ___o___ books, music and taking ___o___ photographs. I usually have ___o___ lunch at college. I usually go ___o___ home by ___o___ car. We have all kinds of food in ___o___ England. I like ___o___ Polish food very much. Sometimes, I go to ___a___ Polish restaurant in Bath. ___The___ restaurant is called “Magda’s”. ___The___ Polish food is delicious.

Exercise (2)

1. Robert and Jessica went to ___a___ party last night.
2. Can you tell me how to get to ___the___ cinema from here?
3. ___The___ college is closed today.
4. Gregory is one of ___the___ strangest people I know.
5. I recommend you try ___the___ tomato soup at this restaurant.
6. ___o___ beer is not good for you.
7. Would you like to see ___a___ film?
8. ___An___ apple a day keeps ___the___ doctor away.
9. I can't believe I failed ___the___ yesterday's test!
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11. There were many dogs in the park. One dog was __a_
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19. Hania broke __0__ glass when she was washing-up.
20. Tom took ___an__ umbrella as it was raining heavily.
21. This is _an__ easy question.
22. Stephen could you speak _a__ little louder.
23. May I have your _0__ phone number?
24. I have never seen ___a__ UFO.
25. May I ask you _a__ question?

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25. Ismail is _the__ best teacher in our school.

26. What is _the__ name of the next station?

27. My friend has _0__ my car today.

28. I went to _the__ sea during my summer holiday.

29. Is there _a__ cash machine near here?

Hope this detailed information and practice about the usage of articles are detailed and useful to you.

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