

Using Determiners (Articles): *a*, *an*, *the*

Study Guide

There are three articles in English: *a*, *an*, and *the*. These words are used before a common noun to indicate whether the noun refers to something specific (the computer) or whether it refers to something that is one among many or hasn't yet been specified (a book, an article). (Note that *a* is used before a consonant, *an* before a vowel.) For some nouns the absence of an article indicates that the reference is not specific, as described below. In deciding which article to use (or whether to omit the article), it is necessary to distinguish between *count nouns*, *noncount nouns*, and *proper nouns*.

Count nouns refer to people and things that can be counted. Most count nouns have separate singular and plural forms: *one teacher*, *two teachers*; *one movie*, *several movies*; *one child*, *nine children*.

Noncount nouns refer to things or ideas that are not counted or are not countable, and they usually have no plural form in English. Most nouns naming abstract ideas are noncount (*happiness*, *loyalty*, *adolescence*, *interest*). Other noncount nouns include natural phenomena (*thunder*, *steam*, *rain*), some foodstuffs (*tofu*, *rice*, *broccoli*).

Proper nouns generally refer to things that have unique names (New York City, Hawaii, Disneyland, Factory School, etc.)

1. With singular count nouns:

A or *an* precedes a singular count noun when the reader does not already know its identity, usually because you have not mentioned it before.

Example: A student in our class wrote a paper about tigers.

The precedes a singular count noun that has a specific identity for the reader, usually because (1) you mentioned it before, (2) you identify it immediately before or after you state it, (3) it is unique (the only one in existence), or (4) it refers to an institution or facility that is shared by a community.

Examples: A student in our class wrote a paper about tigers. The student shared the paper with the rest of the class. [mentioned before]

The most effective essay is often one that the teacher hasn't seen before. [specific identifications]

The sun rises in the east. [sun and east are unique]

Many men and women aspire to the Presidency. [shared institution]

The fax machine has changed business communication. [shared institution]

The is not used before a singular noun that names a general category.

Example: War is hell. (Compare: The war in Croatia left many dead.)

2. With plural count nouns:

A or *an* never precedes a plural noun. *The* does not precede a plural noun that names a general category. However, *the* does precede a plural noun that names specific representatives of a category.

Examples: Men and women are different.
(but)
The women formed a team.

3. With noncount nouns:

A or *an* never precedes a noncount noun. *The* does precede a noncount noun that names specific representatives of a general category.

Examples: Vegetation suffers from drought. [names general category]

The vegetation in the park withered and died. [names specific plants in specific location]

4. With proper nouns:

A or *an* never precedes a proper noun. *The* generally does not precede proper nouns.

Example: Garcia lives in Boulder.

Exercise: Decide whether *a*, *an*, *the* or no article is required in the following sentences.

1. I bought _____ car yesterday.
2. Today is _____ holiday.
3. _____ Michigan is _____ state in _____ USA.
4. I have _____ new job. I work for _____ only phone company in town.
5. _____ War is a devastating event.
6. The reporter covered _____ war in Iraq.
7. I called _____ library at school to find out if they were open.
8. _____ best way to learn _____ language is to practice it every day.
9. English is _____ language I like best.
10. I have never like discussing _____ politics.
11. _____ Honesty is _____ best policy.
12. George W. Bush lives in _____ White House.
13. The secretary handles _____ phone calls all day.
14. _____ three most important things in life are _____ health, _____ happiness and _____
friendship.
15. The doctor said _____ health of his patient was in jeopardy.
16. Have you ever been to _____ Hawaii?
17. Have you seen _____ good movie lately?
18. _____ movie I saw last night was pretty good.
19. His only concern was _____ happiness of his children.
20. He found _____ open window and looked down into _____ street.
21. _____ good way to determine if you want to read _____ book is to read _____ first chapter.
22. Korea is _____ country in _____ Asia.
23. Mary attends _____ San Diego State University.
24. Tim wants to attend _____ university before going to work.
25. _____ woman in my class asked me if I had read _____ chapter that _____ teacher had
assigned.