



## ARTICLES—A, AN & THE

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Every time you use a noun, you must decide if you need to put an article in front of it or not. These tiny words—*a*, *an* and *the*—don't even exist in many other languages, so they can cause plenty of trouble for non-native students. In addition, some nouns don't need articles while other similar nouns need articles. An attached chart shows you some of these similarities and differences.

Two articles—*a* and *an*—are called indefinite because each refers to non-specific, singular nouns. If you decide a particular word needs an indefinite article, use *a* before a word that begins with a consonant. Use *an* before a word that begins with a vowel or a vowel sound. The word *honor*, for example, begins with the consonant *h*, which is silent. *Honor*, therefore, sounds as if it begins with a short *o* sound—a vowel sound--so it takes *an* instead of *a*.

**Example:** I saw *a* good movie last night.  
I fried *an* egg this morning.  
I have *an* hour to study before the test.  
I want *a* home in the countryside.

The other article—*the*—is called definite because it refers to something specific which can be either singular or plural: *the* sun, *the* stars, *the* student center, etc.

**Example:** I hope *the* stars appear in the sky tonight.

Sometimes, a singular noun doesn't need an article at all if it can't be confused or mistaken with anything else: gravity, America. Sometimes, it's okay to use the word *some* as an article: *some* news, *some* surprise, *some* medicine. And sometimes, nouns can use articles or not and yet keep the same meaning.

**Example:** In the winter, *the* weeds still grow.  
In winter, weeds still grow.

Finally, the following sample shows the different meanings a sentence can have depending on which article is used.

**Example:** I am invited to:  
a.) *a* party. (This means you probably don't know about this party.)  
b.) *the* party. (This means you probably know about this party.)  
c.) parties. (This means I often get invited to various parties.)

The following chart gives categories and examples of where to use or not use articles.

<b>Don't Use an Article</b>	<b>Use an Article</b>
Personal names: Jean Smith	A family as a group: the Smiths
Title and name: Prince Charles Archbishop Rigali President Bush	Title without the name: the Prince of Wales the Archbishop of St. Louis the President of the U. S.
Cities, states, countries, continents or individual islands: St. Louis Missouri Vietnam South America Jamaica	Collectives, plural place names or groups of islands: the United States of America the United Arab Emirates the Dominican Republic the Philippines the Bahamas
Individual mountains: Mount Ranier Mount Everest	Mountain ranges: the Cascade Mountains the Himalayas
Individual lakes: Lake Michigan	Collectives or groups of lakes: the Great Lakes
Beaches: Daytona Beach Mission Beach	Rivers, oceans, seas and canals: the Mississippi River the Pacific Ocean the Mediterranean Sea the Suez Canal
Parks: Forest Park Yellowstone	Unique geographic places: the Arctic Circle the South Pole the Sahara Desert
Spacecraft: <i>Challenger</i> <i>Sputnik</i>	Ships, trains and aircraft: the <i>Titanic</i> the <i>Orient Express</i> the <i>Spirit of St. Louis</i>
	Place or geographic names which follow the pattern "the _____ of _____:" the District of Columbia the Gulf of Mexico the Strait of Hormuz
Streets, roads and avenues: Olive Street Manchester Road Highway 170	Major roads with descriptive names: the Pennsylvania Turnpike the Northwest Tollway the Innerbelt
Directions: north, northwest, northeast south, southwest, southeast, east, west	Regions or areas: the Pacific Northwest the South Pacific the East Coast the Middle East

<b>Don't Use an Article</b>	<b>Use an Article</b>
Name+College or University: St. Louis Community College Washington University	the University/College of+name: the University of Missouri the College of the Ozarks
School subjects: history math	School departments: the History Department the Math Department
Languages: German English	the _____ language: the German language the English language
Games and sports: chess soccer	Musical instruments: the saxophone the piano
Places showing an activity happens there: class work bed home college	Exceptions:  the university the hospital (British English, however, <b>doesn't</b> use the article with these two words.)
Holidays: Labor Day New Year's Day	Holiday exceptions: the Fourth of July the Feast of Epiphany
Months and days: August Tuesday	Months and days (spelled out): the month of August the first Tuesday of the month
Magazines: <i>Newsweek</i> <i>People</i>	Newspapers: the <i>St. Louis Post Dispatch</i> the <i>Riverfront Times</i>
Diseases (chronic or long-term illness): kidney failure AIDS cancer	Temporary illness: a cold the flu a sprained ankle
Meals in a general sense: Everyone should eat breakfast. I have to cook dinner tonight. What's for lunch?	Specific meals: I ate a big breakfast. He cooked a good dinner. The lunch they fixed smells good.
	A group of people with a common characteristic, in which the adjective describes the group: the French the poor

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