San José State University Writing Center
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Articles (a/an/the)

There are three **articles** in the English language: *a*, *an*, and *the*. They are placed before nouns and show whether a given noun is general or specific.

Examples of Articles

I want ***a*** *cheeseburger*. (It could be any cheeseburger.)
I could use ***an*** *apple*. (It could be any apple.)
I need ***the*** *notes* that I wrote in class! (The speaker is talking about specific notes.)

Articles communicate different things about a given noun. *A* and *an*, the **indefinite articles**, show that a noun is general, or non-specific. *The*, the **definite article**, shows that a noun is specific.

Using Indefinite Articles

When you want to speak generally about a singular noun, use *a* or *an* before it. In each of the following examples, there is not one specific kind of *bird*, *rock*, or *apple* that the speaker is thinking of, so the article *a* or *an* is placed before the italicized noun.

Examples of ***a/an*** *with Singular, General Nouns*

I would love to have ***a*** *pet bird.* (It doesn't matter what kind of bird.)
I feel like grabbing ***a*** *rock* and throwing it into the ocean. (It could be any rock.)
You look like you could use ***an*** *apple*. (It could be any apple.)

Additionally, when you are first introducing a noun, use the articles *a* or *an*. Even if you refer to a specific object, as long as the person you are speaking to doesn't know what it is, then you introduce it with *a* or *an*.

Examples of ***a/an*** *When Introducing a Noun*

Question: What do you have in your hand?
Answer: I have ***a*** *pen* in my hand.
Question: What do you have for lunch?
Answer: I have ***a*** *sandwich* for lunch.

However, there are some exceptions to this rule. Uncountable nouns can be deceiving. They are never made plural because they are not divided into parts by themselves. For example, you cannot say *two waters* or *two salts*. They can be mistaken for singular nouns, waiting for a person to place *a* or *an* before them, but don't do it.

Examples of Uncountable Nouns

Incorrect: I have *a water*. (We don't think about water in terms of number, but in terms of gallons, glasses, or even bowls. Do not precede the word with *a* or *an*.)

Incorrect: This cliff is scary to climb. It's a good thing I have *a courage*. (Courage is not something that can be divided, so do not place *a* before it.)

Examples of Common Uncountable Nouns

hope, love, peace, salt, sugar, milk, juice, paper, homework, energy, confidence, advice, work

To decide between when to use *a* and when to use *an*, think about the initial sound of the noun that follows the article. Use *a* when the noun begins with a consonant sound (*a map*); use *an* when the noun begins with a vowel sound (*an otter*).

Using the Definite Article

While *a* and *an* are used for nouns that are general, *the* is used for nouns that are known by you and the person you are speaking to. In the following examples, you will notice that *the* is used regardless of whether or not the noun is plural or uncountable (unlike *a* or *an*).

*Examples of **the** before a Specified Noun*

I have an apple in my bag. ***The** apple* is red.
Can you please give me some water? Thanks for giving me ***the** water*.
You know ***the** Spanish textbook* I gave you the other day? Can I please have it back?

You will also have to use *the* when a noun is preceded by a superlative adjective. Whenever an adjective ends with {-est}, it means that the noun it is describing stands alone; it is at the top, or the bottom, of a specific category. It could be *the tallest* or *the shortest*; it could be *the prettiest* or *the ugliest*; it could be *the nicest* or *the meanest*. If you are introducing a superlative adjective, it is introduced with *the.*

*Examples of **the** before Superlatives*

***The** smartest person* in the world used to be Albert Einstein.
***The** tallest person* in the world was nine feet tall.
Someone once said ***the** best things* in life are free.

Activity 1

Accurately introduce the following nouns using *a*, *an*, or no article.

1. I have __ pet beetle. His name is Bubba.
2. I am really craving __ milk right now.
3. I made __ new friend today.
4.__ San José State University is great!

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. I have *a* pet beetle. His name is Bubba.
2. I am really craving milk right now.
3. I made *a* new friend today.
4. San José State University is great!

Activity 2

Accurately introduce the following nouns with *a*, *an*, *the*, or no article.

1. I could really use __ sandwich right now.
2. I always add __ sugar and __ milk.
3. If I add __ sugar and __ milk, then I have __ best cup of coffee I could ask for.
4. I have __ pencil in my hand, and __ pencil is blue.
5. I go to __ school in San José. __ school is San José State University.
6. I am taking __ exam right now. __ exam is quizzing me on articles.
7. There are three articles in English. __ articles are *a, an, and the.*

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. I could really use *a* sandwich right now.
2. I always add sugar and milk.
3. If I add sugar and milk, then I have *the* best cup of coffee I could ask for.
4. I have *a* pencil in my hand, and *the* pencil is blue.
5. I go to *a* school in San José. *The* school is called San José State University.
6. I am taking *an* exam right now. *The* exam is quizzing me on articles.
7. There are three articles in English. *The* articles are a, an, and the.

References

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