

# Articles: a/an/the

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2º NB Inglés



# Using 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
- For example, if I say, "Let's read **the** book," I mean a *specific* book. If I say, "Let's read **a** book," I mean *any* book rather than a specific book.



- 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.

- Normally, we use **a/an** to refer to something for the first time. For example, "We went to a museum in Paris. We ate at the museum too".

# 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 there's only *one* we're talking about here.



# 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
- 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.

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- 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 /j/ 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.



# Countable and Noncountable 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**

- 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***



# Don't forget the:

- The centre, the top, the middle, the bottom, the left, the right, the end of, the beginning of...
- The same, the best, the worst...
- The sun, the moon, the world, the sky, the sea, the ground, the country...
- The police, the fire brigade, the army...
- The piano, the guitar, the trumpet, the flute...
- The radio (but television, without the)
- The doctor, the toilet, the bank, the theatre, the post office, the dentist, the cinema...



# Do not use the:

- Breakfast, lunch, dinner
- Go to work, get to work, be at work, start work, finish work...
- Got to school, be at school, start school, leave school...
- Go to university, be at university...
- Go to church, be in church (or mass)
- Go to bed, be in bed
- Go to hospital, be in hospital
- Go to prison, be in prison
- Go home, get home, arrive home, come home, walk home, leave home, be at home, stay at home



# Omission of Articles

- Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:
- Names of languages and nationalities: *Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian*
- Names of sports: *volleyball, hockey, baseball*
- Names of academic subjects: *mathematics, biology, history, computer science*