

ARTICLES IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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Intermediate Grammar
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ARTICLES are words that define a noun as specific or unspecific In English. In English grammar, an article is a type of determiner that precedes and provides context to a noun. A determiner is a word or a group of words that specifies, identifies, or quantifies the noun or noun phrase that follows it: There are only two types of articles in English, definite or indefinite. The three main articles in English grammar are "the," "a," and "an." This grammatical concept may sound simple, but there are some tricky rules related to using it correctly.

Look at these examples:

“I work in the office.”

By using the article “the”, we’ve shown that it was one specific office.

“I work in an office.”

By using the article a, we’ve created a general statement, implying that any office would be the subject’s office.

English has two types of articles: definite and indefinite. The only definite article is "the," which specifies a particular individual or thing in a particular context. For example, in the title of a famous Sherlock Holmes story, "The Hound of the Baskervilles," the first word of the sentence, "the," is a definite article because it refers to a specific case that the illustrious fictional detective tried to—and, of course, did—solve.

By contrast, Purdue Owl notes the indefinite articles—"a" and "an"—signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to any member of a group, or something that cannot be identified specifically by the writer or speaker.

A. The Definite Article

The definite article is the word the. It limits the meaning of a noun to one particular thing. For example, your friend might ask, “Are you going to the party this weekend?” The definite article tells you that your friend is referring to a specific party that both of you know about. The definite article can be used with singular, plural, or uncountable nouns. Below are some examples of the definite article the used in context:

“Please give me the hammer.”

“Please give me the red hammer; the blue one is too small.”

“Please give me the nail.”

“Please give me the large nail; it’s the only one strong enough to hold this painting.”

“Please give me the hammer and the nail.”

B. The Indefinite Article

The indefinite article takes two forms. It’s the word a when it precedes a word that begins with a consonant. It’s the word an when it precedes a word that begins with a vowel. The indefinite article indicates that a noun refers to a general idea rather than a particular thing. For example, you might ask your friend, “Should I bring a gift to the party?” Your friend will understand that you are not asking about a specific type of gift or a specific item. “I am going to bring an apple pie,” your friend tells you. Again, the indefinite article indicates that she is not talking about a specific apple pie. Your friend probably doesn’t even have any pie yet. The indefinite article only appears with singular nouns. Consider the following examples of indefinite articles used in context:

“Please hand me a book; any book will do.”

“Please hand me an autobiography; any autobiography will do.”

C. Using “A” and “An”

The key to knowing when to use "a" or "an" depends on the sound at the beginning of the noun (or adjective) that is being modified, not whether the noun or adjective actually begins with a vowel or consonant.

"If the noun (or adjective) that comes after the article begins with a vowel sound, the appropriate indefinite article to use is 'an.' A vowel sound is a sound that is created by any

vowel in the English language: 'a,' 'e,' 'i,' 'o,' 'u,' and sometimes 'y' if it makes an 'e' or 'i' sound."

By contrast, if the noun or adjective that comes after the article begins with a consonant that actually sounds like a consonant, use "a." "The Complete English Grammar Rules" presents some examples of when to use "a" or "an" depending on the sound of the first letter of the noun the article is modifying:

"What an unusual discovery."

This is correct because "unusual" starts with a "u" that makes an "uh" sound.

"What a unique discovery."

This is correct because the adjective after the article begins with a "u" that sounds like the consonant sound "yu."

I bought "a horse."

You use the "a" here because "horse" starts with an "h" that sounds like the consonant "h."

"A historical event is worth recording."

Many folks think it should be "an" historic," but the article "a" is correct because the "h" is pronounced and sounds like the consonant "h."

"An hour" has passed.

In this case, you use "an" because the "h" in hour is silent, and the noun actually begins with the vowel sound "ow."

Note that in the first two sentences above, the article actually precedes the adjectives, "unusual" and "unique," but the articles actually modify the noun, "discovery" in both sentences. Sometimes the article directly precedes an adjective that modifies the noun. When this occurs, look at the first letter of the adjective when determining whether to use "a" or "an" and then use the same rules as those discussed above to determine which article to use.

D. Exceptions: Choosing A or An

Here are a few exceptions to the general rule of using a before words that start with consonants and an before words that begin with vowels. The first letter of the word honor, for example, is a consonant, but it's unpronounced. In spite of its spelling, the word honor begins with a vowel sound. Therefore, we use an. Consider the example sentence below for an illustration of this concept.

"My mother is a honest woman." (Incorrect)

"My mother is an honest woman." (Correct)

Similarly, when the first letter of a word is a vowel but is pronounced with a consonant sound, use a, as in the sample sentence below:

"She is an United States senator." (Incorrect)

"She is a United States senator." (Correct)

This holds true with acronyms and initialisms, too: **an** LCD display, **a** UK-based company, **an** HR department, and **a** URL.

E. Article Before an Adjective

Sometimes an article modifies a noun that is also modified by an adjective. The usual word order is article + adjective + noun. If the article is indefinite, choose a or an based on the word that immediately follows it. Consider the following examples for reference:

“Eliza will bring a small gift to Sophie’s party.”

“I heard an interesting story yesterday.”

F. Articles with Pronouns

Possessive pronouns can help identify whether you’re talking about specific or nonspecific items. As we’ve seen, articles also indicate specificity. But if you use both a possessive pronoun and an article at the same time, readers will become confused. Possessive pronouns are words like his, my, our, its, her, and their. Articles should not be used with pronouns. Consider the examples below.

“Why are you reading the my book?”

The and my should not be used together since they are both meant to modify the same noun. Instead, you should use one or the other, depending on the intended meaning:

“Why are you reading the book?”

“Why are you reading my book?”

G. Indefinite

When dealing with articles, nouns can either be:

Uncountable - You cannot count a specific number.

Countable - The noun does indicate a specific number.

When a noun is uncountable, it is preceded by an indefinite article—"a" or "an." Uncountable nouns are nouns that are either difficult or impossible to count. Uncountable nouns include intangible things (e.g., information, air), liquids (e.g., milk, wine), and things that are too large or numerous to count (e.g., equipment, sand, wood). Because these things can't be counted, you should never use a or an with them—remember, the indefinite article is only for singular nouns. Uncountable nouns can be modified by words like some, however. Consider the examples below for reference:

"Please give me a water." (Incorrect)

Water is an uncountable noun and should not be used with the indefinite article.

"Please give me some water." (Correct)

However, if you describe the water in terms of countable units (like bottles), you can use the indefinite article.

"Please give me a bottle of water." (Correct)

"Please give me an ice." (Incorrect)

"Please give me an ice cube." (Correct)

"Please give me some ice." (Correct)

Note that depending on the context, some nouns can be countable or uncountable (e.g., hair, noise, time):

“We need a light in this room.” (Correct)

“We need some light in this room.” (Correct)

H. When to Omit Articles

As the first sentence in the previous example shows, you can sometimes omit the article particularly when the number or quantity is not known. Sometimes you would use the article in American English but not British English. For example:

"I have to go to the hospital." (American English)

"I have to go to hospital." (British English)

Conversely, sometimes you omit the article in American English but not in British English, as in:

"I played rugby." (American English)

"I play the rugby. (British English)

In these cases, the use, or omission, of the definite article depends on the type of English being spoken.

Occasionally, articles are omitted altogether before certain nouns. In these cases, the article is implied but not actually present. This implied article is sometimes called a “zero article.” Often, the article is omitted before nouns that refer to abstract ideas. Look at the following examples:

“Let’s go out for a dinner tonight.” (Incorrect)

“Let’s go out for dinner tonight.” (Correct)

“The creativity is a valuable quality in children.” (Incorrect)

“Creativity is a valuable quality in children.” (Correct)

Many languages and nationalities are not preceded by an article. Consider the example below:

“I studied the French in high school for four years.” (Incorrect)

“I studied French in high school for four years.” (Correct)

Sports and academic subjects do not require articles. See the sentences below for reference:

“I like to play the baseball.” (Incorrect)

“I like to play baseball.” (Correct)

“My sister was always good at the math.” (Incorrect)

“My sister was always good at math.” (Correct)

I. Pronouns, Demonstratives, and Possessives

You can also replace articles with pronouns, demonstratives, and possessives. They all work in the same way as a demonstrative article—naming a specific thing:

1. In English grammar, a pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun, noun phrase, or noun clause. So, instead of the sentence: "Give the book to me," you would replace the definite article, "the," as well as the noun it modifies, "book," with the pronoun, "it," to yield the sentence: "Give it to me."
2. A demonstrative is a determiner or a pronoun that points to a particular noun or to the noun it replaces. So, instead of saying: "The movie is boring," you would replace the definite article, "the," with the demonstrative "this" or "that" to yield: "This movie is boring" or "That movie is boring."
3. A possessive pronoun is a pronoun that can take the place of a noun phrase to show ownership. Instead of saying: "The tale is long and sad!" you would replace the definite article, "the," to yield a sentence, such as: "Mine is a long and sad tale!" In the first sentence, the definite article, "the," modifies the noun, "tale." In the second sentence, the possessive pronoun, "mine," also modifies the noun, "tale."

J. High-Ranking Words

According to Ben Yagoda's book, "When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better and/or Worse," the word "the" is the most commonly used word in the English language, occurring "nearly 62,000 times in every million words written or uttered—or about once every 16 words." Meanwhile, "a" ranks as the fifth most commonly used word—and "an" ranks 34th.

So take the time to learn these important words—as well as their replacements, such as pronouns, demonstratives, and possessives—correctly to boost your command of English grammar, and in the process, enlighten your friends, impress your teachers, and gain the admiration of your associates.