

# Article Usage: “A,” “An,” and “The”

# What is an article?

- An **article** (abbreviated ART) is a word (or prefix or suffix) that is used with a noun to indicate the type of reference being made by the noun (Article, 2014).

# How do we use articles?

- Used with countable nouns such as chair, dog, cat, pencil, bottle, etc.
- Two types of articles: definite and indefinite

# Definite article

- Definite article: “the”
- Used for very specific nouns; not just any pencil, but **the yellow pencil**.
- The blue dog, the black cat, the chair which is next to the couch
- Can be used with singular objects (The purple scarf) or plural (the dogs).

# Indefinite article

- Indefinite article: “A” and “An”
- “A” is used before nouns that begin with a consonant; “an” is used before nouns that begin with a vowel.
- Used for more general, vague nouns: “Hand me a pencil.” (any pencil.)
- An elephant, a dog, a chair, an apple
- Used only with singular objects
- Think of replacing “a” or “an” with “one.”
- Also used when first mentioning something: “**A butterfly** landed on my dog’s nose. **The butterfly** was pink.”

# When we do not use articles

- We don't use indefinite articles in front of non-countable nouns. These include abstract concepts such as happiness, harmony, sadness, irony, justice, etc.
  - The definite article can be used if indicating the instance in which it occurred: "The sadness she felt at his passing"
- We don't use indefinite articles with nouns that are described in quantities, such as liquids or large amounts of small solids such as beans, sand, dirt, etc. We can, however, use the definite article: "The brown dirt," "the cold water," etc.
- Names, pronouns, and proper nouns
- When being general: "I like water" (any/all water) "Cats are small" (any/all cats)

## Examples:

- ~~I am the happy~~ I am happy
- ~~Give me a water~~ Give me **a glass** of water. **The water** is cold!
- ~~I am happy to see the Susie!~~ I am happy to see Susie!

## Some exceptions

- Some non-countable nouns can take the indefinite article.
  - Examples: “We came to **an understanding**”
- If the name of a location is descriptive and contains a countable noun, use the definite article.
  - Examples: “The United States of America,” “The University of Houston-Clear Lake,” “The Writing Center”
- If a name is being described as though it is a countable noun, it can take the definite article.
  - Example: “The Clear Lake that I know has lots of good restaurants;” (instead of “the place”) “You are not behaving like the Brandon that I know.” (instead of “the person”)

# How to decide in your own writing

- First, look at your noun. Is it countable or non countable?
- Example: “I want to describe a cat. ‘Cat’ is a countable noun.”

## Step two:

- Next, decide if it is the first time something has been mentioned.
- If it is, use the indefinite article.

## Step three:

- Are you being specific about the noun, or general?
- Example: “Yes; I am talking about a specific cat.”

## Step four:

- If you are describing a specific noun, use the definite article. If you are being more vague, use the indefinite article.
- Example: “I have **a black cat**. **The cat** chased **the grey mouse**.”
- Example with indefinite article: “I saw **a cat** chase **a mouse** today.”

## References

Article (grammar). (n.d.). Retrieved November 24, 2014  
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