

Articles: Rules and Exceptions to the Rules

In English grammar, an article is what defines a noun as specific or unspecific. You'll most likely recognize them as words like "an" or "the".

Definition of the article as a part of speech:

- Articles can be thought of as adjectives because they function to modify a noun by limiting, quantifying or determining.
e.g. "an onion" refers to any one onion.
"the onion" refers to one particular onion which has been previously discussed or will be discussed with further descriptive writing.

The two basic types of articles: Definite and Indefinite

- Definite:** "the" can be used with singular or plural nouns, and refers to one or more people, places, or things already mentioned specifically in discussion, or nouns which are about to be described specifically.
e.g. We went to Disneyland last weekend, but **the** line for Magic Mountain was so long that we didn't go on it.
e.g. I love to bake banana bread. **The** loaf my mother and I made yesterday tasted great.
- Indefinite:** "a/an" is used as an indicator of any singular object, not a particular one under discussion. "A" is used with a noun beginning with a consonant sound, and "an" is used before nouns beginning with a vowel sound.
e.g. a dog; an apple; an honour; a UNBC shirt; a CPR handbook; an RNA structure

General Guidelines for Article Use:

Articles are **generally** used with countable nouns, or nouns that can be quantified, but not with nouns we qualify. Rules and exceptions follow below.

Rule #1: Using "the" denotes particular nouns (plural or singular) which are under discussion. Using "a/an" denotes any one of a noun in a category (singular).

Rule #2 with Exceptions: Do NOT use articles with (i-vii):

- Proper names of locations and religious ideas of locations: *Europe, Alaska, Main Street, Toronto, heaven, hell*

Exceptions: Use "the" with official names of countries when it is needed to give meaning to a noun within that country name such as "union," "kingdom," "state(s)," "republic": *the United*

States of America, the Netherlands (land is the noun), the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of China

Further exceptions: we DO use “the” with the names of certain geographical features: oceans, seas, rivers and deserts: *the Pacific, the Amazon, the Red Sea, the Gobi Desert*

But NOT with lakes or mountains: *Mt. Fuji, Lake Michigan*

- ii. Titles of officials when accompanied by personal names: *President Truman, Emperor Napoleon, Chairman Mao*
Exceptions: *the Honourable Susie Parker*
- iii. Fields of study: *Ali studied literature. Mya enjoyed engineering.*
Exceptions: languages. Use “the” when including the word language: *He used the Sanskrit language, not the Urdu language. She speaks Spanish, not Portugese.*
- iv. Names of diseases: *There is no cure for cancer, but there are several treatments. My mother has sinusitis. She was diagnosed with Addison’s disease.*
Exceptions: *There is no cure for the common cold. I’ve got a fever* (“cold” and “fever” are really symptoms – they are not diseases with names)
- v. Holidays, days of the week, and months of the year: *Christmas, Hanukah, Rosh Hashanah, New Year’s Day, Halloween, Mardi Gras, Monday, December*
Exceptions: *the Sabbath, the Day of the Dead (Mexico)*
- vi. Colleges and universities: *Florida State University, Syracuse, Harvard, Ithaca College, Emerson College*
Exceptions: use “the” with names containing the word “of” when pronouncing the word “of”: *the University of Northern British Columbia, the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*
- vii. Sports and games: *We played basketball. Canadians love ice hockey. My little brother played soccer this year. I decided to take up dancing. Some people may not consider poker a sport, but it is more highly televised than bowling. Go get Monopoly! Do you play cribbage?*

Rule #3: Articles are used with concrete nouns, but not abstract nouns.

Concrete nouns: tangible objects; countable in size, mass, volume, or amount; are people, places or things. Concrete nouns can often take either “the” or “a/an”, and the selection of which article is most appropriate is dependent on our meaning.

Examples: *cat, table, house, mug, pen, book, door*

Abstract nouns: not countable, intangible, and often ideas.

Examples: *freedom, love, honesty, peace, surprise, disgust, wealth, poverty, truth*

Ambiguous nouns: Some nouns can be either, depending on the context of the sentence. “Context” is an example of this type, as I can either refer to the specific context of this

sentence, or I can refer to the broad idea of context as a tool for understanding the meaning of words.

Examples:

1. *Sugar is sweet.* / 2. *Please pass the sugar.*

The former example refers to the concept of sugar, whereas the latter example refers to a specific amount of sugar under discussion.

1. *Apples are crisp and nutritious.* / 2. *I picked an apple from the tree.* / 3. *I selected the apple with the greenest, shiniest skin.*

Example 1 refers to all apples everywhere, and employs the plural form of the noun apple.

Example 2 refers to an apple that is not unique, and was chosen at random and is not under any specific discussion, whereas the apple in example 3 refers to a particular apple which is under discussion.

Examples using abstract nouns:

1. *Eternity lasts forever.* / 2. *I waited an eternity for the bus.*

When eternity is used to refer to the general concept, no article is used; however, when eternity is quantified as a specific time span (in this case, it is used as hyperbole, or to describe a time span with exaggeration). The quantification requires an article.

Examples with some particularly tricky nouns:

1. Environment vs. Nature:

Environment is a concrete quantifiable noun which requires an article in every case:

The environment of the classroom is open and promotes discussion. I am concerned with improving the air quality in Prince George and thus improving the environment.

Nature is actually a proper noun (Mother Nature) which is often used in its common, or uncapitalized, form: nature. There is only one Nature, and it is an abstract concept; therefore, we do not use an article with this word. However, if we use *nature* in its alternate, common form (not referring to a general idea but a specific aspect under discussion), then we do use the article “the”:

We went for a walk to enjoy Nature. We discussed the nature of things. It is just the nature of the beast.

2. Peace:

Peace is an abstract concept, yet we can refer to periods or instances of peace: in these latter instances we use an article. Generally in referring to specific instances of peace, we may say “peacefulness”. There can be many aspects to peace, but *peace* can never be plural (i.e. there are no “peaces”).

Let’s hope for world peace. Peace and quiet are two of my favorite things. The peace which followed the war of the previous decade was written about in many books. A quiet peacefulness fell over the sleeping children.