

Teaching Articles: A, An, and The

 Tanya Trusler



Articles in English are tiny words that can cause big problems for learners. Many beginner students who don't use articles in their native tongue can have trouble learning when to use *a* or *the*. Higher-level students can also struggle with the many exceptions and quirks of article usage. Before getting into a beginner or intermediate lesson (see "Practice" below), try presenting the basic English articles *a*, *an*, and *the* in chart form to help learners compare and understand the differences.

Chart



Articles

	General (any one / I don't know which one)	Specific (a certain one / I know which one)
Singular (1)	A or AN (singular count noun) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I gave a flower to my mom. 	THE (singular count noun) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pass me the pen that you're holding.
Plural (2 or more)	Ø (plural count noun or non-count noun) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I gave flowers to my mom. I have money in my pocket. 	THE (plural count noun or non-count noun) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pass me the pens that you're holding. I brought the money that I owe you.

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Articles Chart – Grammar & Usage Resources

Tips

Tip #1

Use *a/an/Ø* with **general** nouns.

What is a general (indefinite) noun? For example:

- I'm hungry. I want a sandwich. Can you see a sandwich right now? No, you can't. That's why it's **a** sandwich. I don't have a specific sandwich in mind. I can't see it, and you can't see it. We don't know which sandwich I'm talking about. It could be any sandwich.

Tip #2

Use *the* with **specific** nouns.

What is a specific (definite) noun? For example:

- *[The teacher gives a blue pen to a student]* Kim, can you pass me the blue pen? Can everyone see the blue pen? Yes, we can. That's why it's **the** blue pen. I know which pen it is. I can see it, and you can see it. I'm talking about only this one specific pen, and we all know which pen I'm talking about.

Tip #3

Use *an* before words that begin with a **vowel** (a, e, i, o, u) and *a* before words that begin with a **consonant**.

Note

Words that begin with a "u" or "h" take *an* if the noun begins with a vowel sound (e.g., *an umbrella, an heir*) and *a* if the noun begins with a consonant sound (e.g., *a university, a house*).

Tip #4

Use *the* when there is **only one** of something.

Examples include:

- *the sun, the moon, the earth*
- *the library, the bank, the laundromat* (in a town)
- *the door, the whiteboard, the teacher's desk* (in your classroom).

Tip #5

Use *the* when it's the **second mention** of the noun.

Even though we still can't see it, we know which one the speaker is talking about because it has been introduced. For example:

- I saw **a** movie last night. **The** movie was so boring that I fell asleep.

Tip #6

Use *the* when the noun has an **adjective clause or phrase** that modifies it.

The extra information that describes the noun makes it clear which noun we're referring to. For example:

- **The** dog that follows me home every day is really friendly.

Practice

ESL Library has two great lessons on Articles. Our new Articles – Beginner lesson covers *a, an,* and *the,* and provides many mixed exercises for practice. Our reformatted Articles – Intermediate lesson goes into great detail about the many uses and exceptions of English articles.