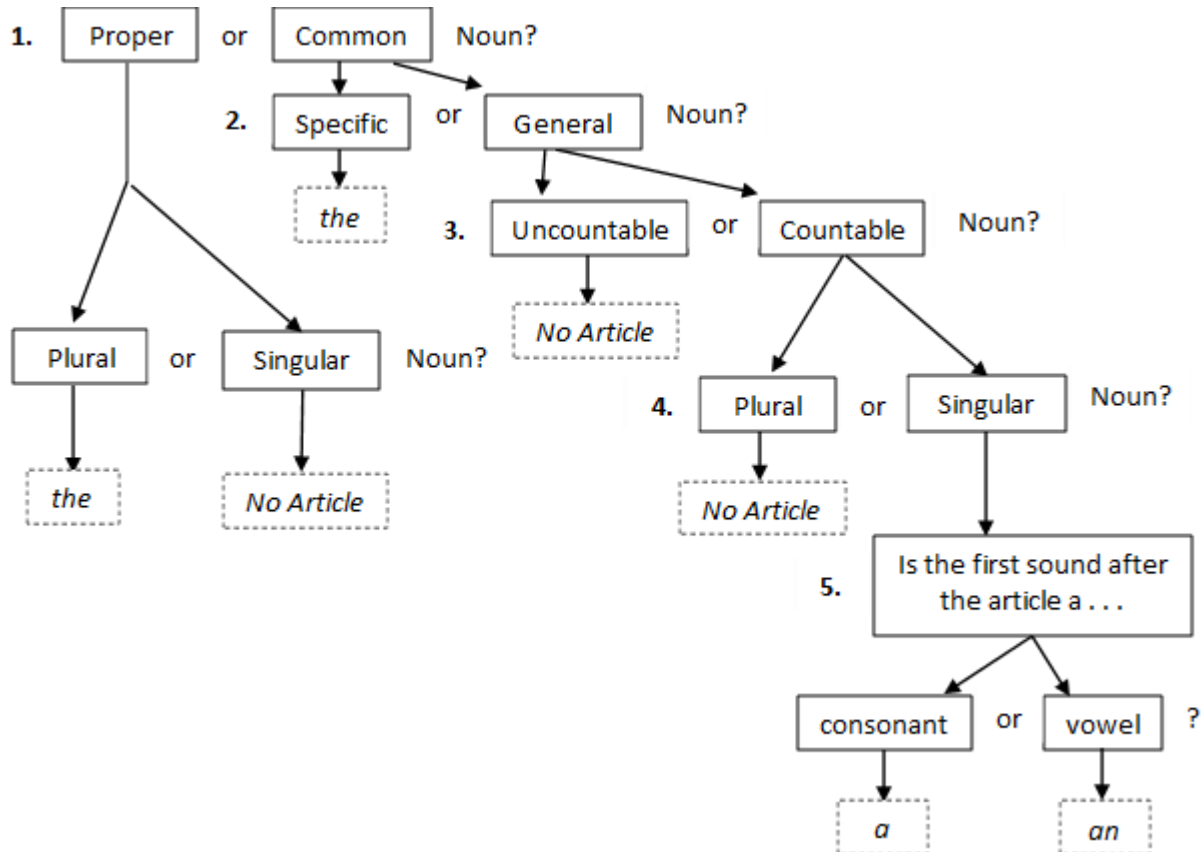


Articles are words that introduce and give clarifying information about nouns or noun phrases. There are two types: **indefinite** (*a* and *an*) and **definite** (*the*). While this handout provides basic information, writers should write with their specific audience and assignment in mind.

## When to Use an Article



## Proper or Common Nouns

A **proper noun** is the specific name of a person, place, or thing (*John, Tokyo, UVU*)

- Use *the* before **plural proper nouns** (*The Patels, the Rocky Mountains, the Netherlands*)
- Do not use an article before **singular proper nouns** (*David Lopez, Mount Hood, Egypt*)

A **common noun** is a general word for a person, place, or thing (*person, city, university*)

### Exceptions

Use *the* with the **proper noun** (name) of a historical event or period (*the Middle Ages*), building (*the Capitol*), or geographic feature (*the Gulf of Mexico, the Panama Canal, the Red Sea, the Equator*).

## Specific or General Nouns

**Specific nouns** refer to a specific member or to several specific members of a general category. Normally, they require the definite article, *the*.

**Example:** **The dogs** in the park are playing. (The word *dogs* refers to a specific group of dogs).

**General nouns** refer to a general class of something, rather than to a specific member of a class.

**Example:** **Dogs** are animals. (The word *dogs* refers to a class of animals, not to any specific animals).

### **Exceptions**

Often when a specific noun is mentioned for the first time, it is treated like a general noun. However, any time the noun is mentioned after, the definite article *the* is used as it is talking about a specific noun.

**Example:** Yesterday, I bought **a book**, but it was not until today that I was able to read **the book**.

## **Uncountable or Countable Nouns**

**Uncountable nouns** cannot be numbered and usually do not require articles (*jewelry, happiness, dirt*).

**Countable nouns** refer to something that can be counted (*children, thoughts, problems*).

### **Exceptions**

An uncountable noun can be turned into a specific noun. In such cases, use the definite article *the*. This situation normally occurs

1) if the uncountable noun is modified by a phrase or clause that makes it more specific and limited

**Example:** John shoveled **the dirt** in that pile. (The word *dirt* refers to a specific pile of dirt).

2) if the uncountable noun refers to a specific portion, amount, or collection of the uncountable noun

**Example:** John shoveled most of **the dirt**. (The word *most* makes the amount of dirt countable).

## **Plural or Singular Nouns**

**Plural nouns** (as long as they are general) do not need an article. (**Cars** are used for transportation.)

**Singular nouns** need either *a* or *an*. (**A car** is used for transportation.)

### **Exceptions**

A countable, singular noun sometimes takes *the* when it refers to a general group.

**Example:** **The customer** is always right. (*The customer* refers to the general group of all customers).

## **Which Indefinite Article (A or An)**

Use *a* before words that begin with consonant sounds. Use *an* before words that begin with vowel sounds (*an owl, an hour*). The article is determined by the word directly following the article (*a dog, an ugly dog*).

## **When Not to Use an Article**

There are several cases where writers should not place an article before a noun:

- Before the names of languages, sports, and fields of study (*Gaelic, soccer, sociology*, etc.)
- When the noun is modified by a **demonstrative pronoun** (*this, that, those, these*, etc.)
- When the noun is modified by a **possessive pronoun** (*my, his, her, its, their, your*, etc.)
- When the noun is modified by various other **quantity words** that indicate a noun will follow (*all, another, each, every, many, much, some, seven*, etc.)