

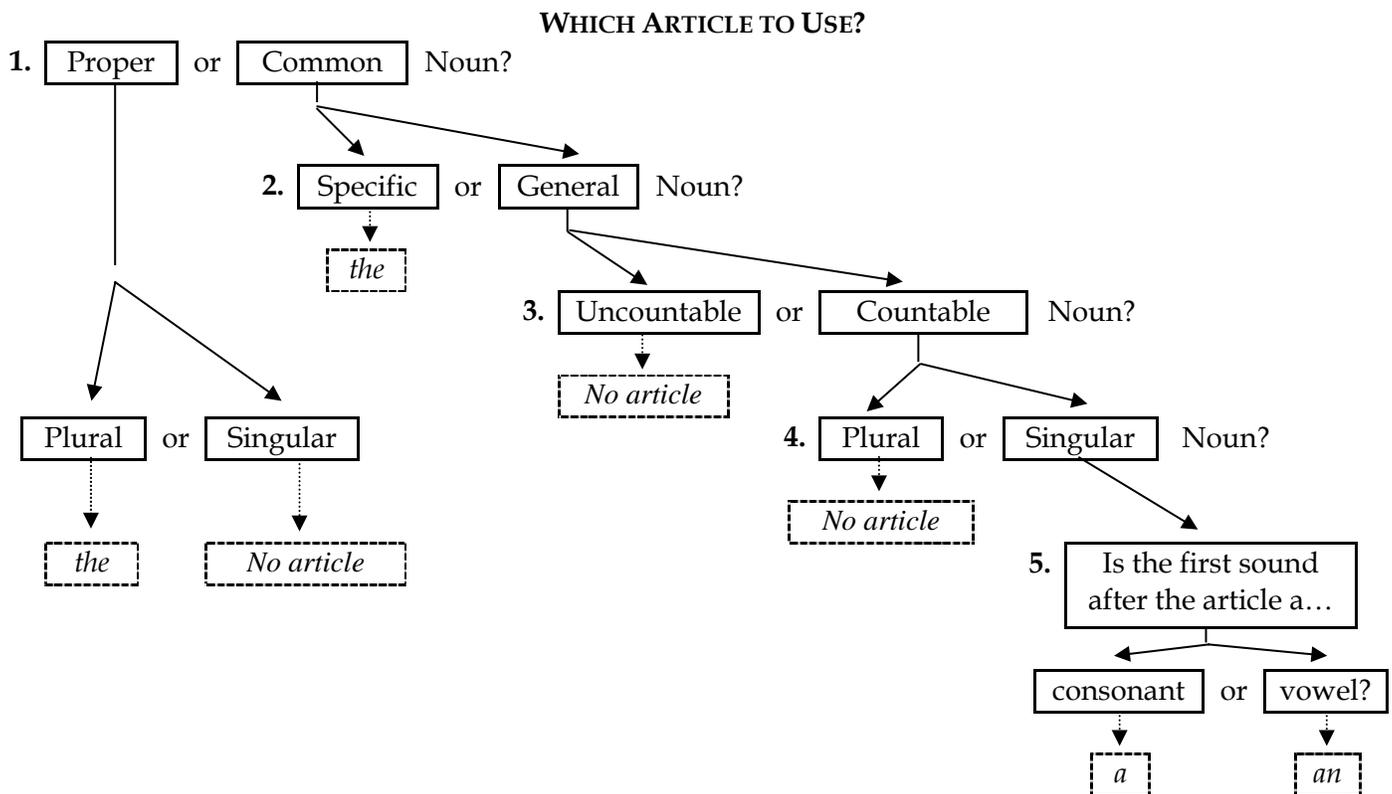
# Articles

*Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.*

Articles modify nouns, and their presence always means that a noun will follow. There are two types of articles, **indefinite articles** (*a* and *an*) and one **definite article** (*the*).

## When to Use an Article

Use the chart below to help you decide whether a noun needs an article, and which article to use:



### 1. Proper or Common Noun?

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

- Use *the* before **plural proper nouns** (*the Smiths, the Rocky Mountains*).
- Use no article before **singular proper nouns** (*John Smith, Mount Rushmore*).

A **common noun** is not a name, but a general group (*person, city, university*). To decide if a common noun needs an article, you must decide if the noun is specific or general (see the next section).

**Exceptions:** Use *the* with the **proper noun** (name) of a historical event, historical period, highway, building, ocean, sea, point on a globe (i.e., *the Equator*), desert, gulf, etc. Only use *the* with the name of a country if the name is plural, as in *the Netherlands*.

### 2. Specific or General Noun?

**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 that park are ugly.* Here, the word *dogs* refers to specific, individual animals, rather than all dogs.

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

EXAMPLE: *Dogs are man's best friends.* (The word *Dogs* refers to a class of animals, not to any specific animals.)

To decide if a general noun needs an article, determine whether it is countable. (See the next section.)

**Note:** 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 thereafter, the definite article *the* is used.

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

## 3. Uncountable or Countable Noun?

**Uncountable nouns** cannot be numbered (*jewelry, happiness, and dirt*). Generally, you should not place articles before uncountable nouns.

**Countable nouns** refer to something that can be counted (*baby, thought, and problem*). To determine if a countable noun needs an article, decide if it is plural or singular (see the next section).

**Exceptions:** Sometimes, 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, or
- (2) if the uncountable noun refers to a specific portion, amount, or collection of the uncountable noun.

EXAMPLE: John ate dirt. (The word *dirt* does not refer to any specific pile of dirt.)

EXAMPLE: John scooped up some dirt with his shovel. Then, to my dismay, he ate the dirt.  
(The second instance of the word *dirt* is preceded by *the* because the writer is referring to a specific pile of dirt.)

## 4. Plural or Singular Noun?

If the noun is plural and general, no article is needed. If the noun is singular, *a* or *an* is needed.

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

Example: *The cat is a great pet.* (*The cat* refers to the general group of all cats.)

## 5. Which Indefinite Article (A or An)?

Use *an* before words that begin with vowel sounds. Use *a* before words that begin with consonant sounds. **Note:** The article is determined by the word directly after the article, even if the word is an adjective, rather than the noun (Example: *An ugly dog* versus *a dog*).

## When Not to Use an Article

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

- Before the names of languages, sports, and fields of study (Spanish, soccer, sociology)
- 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.)