English as a Second Language (ESL): Use of Articles

One of the most confusing parts of English grammar for many non-native speakers is the use of articles. In English, articles are used to modify nouns in certain situations; they are not used before every noun. There are two types of articles: indefinite (a, an) and definite (the). Indefinite articles are used when the speaker or writer is talking about a non-specific member of a group, while a definite article is used for a specific member(s) of a group.

Note. The following rules for choosing articles apply to both speaking and writing, so any mention of a speaker could also apply to a writer.

Indefinite Articles (A/An)

Indefinite articles are used when a speaker is talking about a non-specific noun that could be any member of a group. An indefinite article can only modify a singular count noun. A count noun is any noun that can be counted, such as the noun “table” (How many tables are there?) or “baby” (How many babies are there?). Noncount nouns are nouns that cannot be counted, such as “rice” or “courage.” (How many rices/courages are there? are nonsensical questions.)

A: Use a to modify a non-specific, singular count noun that begins with a consonant sound. In addition to consonants, this includes words that begin with the following sounds: “yoo” (IPA: [juː]) as in the words “user” or “European” and “wo” (IPA: [wʌ]) as in the word “one.” A couple of examples are given below:

- **A raindrop fell from the sky.** (One raindrop fell, and whichever one it was out of the whole group of raindrops does not matter.)
- **That novel has a one-dimensional heroine.** (“One-dimensional” begins with a “wo” sound [wʌ], and the noun being modified is singular and could be any member of the group of heroines.)
- **A user can access his account with the password.** (“User” begins with the “yoo” sound [juː], and the noun being modified is singular and could be any member of the group of users.)
A can also be used to make generalizations, as in the following examples:

- **A pen is a writing utensil.** (This is a general statement about any and all pens.)
- **A dog is a common household pet.** (This is a general statement about any and all dogs.)

**An:** Use *an* to modify a non-specific, singular count noun that begins with a vowel sound. This includes vowels as well as words that begin with a silent h as in “herb” or “honor.” Below are a couple of examples:

- **An elephant escaped from the zoo.** (“Elephant” is a singular, non-specific count noun that begins with a vowel.)
- **He planted an herb garden in his yard.** (“Herb” begins with a silent h and is a singular, non-specific count noun.)

### Definite Articles (The)

A definite article is used when a speaker is talking about a specific member of a group. The noun being modified can be either singular or plural, as well as count or noncount. Unlike indefinite articles, a definite article is used only when the noun is known to both the speaker and the listener. Below are a few examples:

- **The dishes need to be washed.** (The speaker is talking about a particular group of dishes that is a specific part of the group of all dishes.)
- **Her piano is in the living room.** (The speaker is talking about a particular living room which is a specific member of the group of all living rooms.)
- **The happiness of others is important to him.** (The speaker is talking about a specific happiness, not happiness as a general idea, so a definite article is required.)

**Note.** If a/an has been used with a noun when it is first mentioned, the article changes to the when the same noun is mentioned later.

- **The local newspaper printed an article about pet health yesterday. The article discussed how to protect dogs from ticks.**
No Article

Certain nouns require neither an indefinite nor definite article before them. Here are a few of the most common guidelines:

- When making generalizations with plural nouns, no article is used.
  - Peaches grow on trees. (This is a general statement about peaches, which is a plural count noun.)
- No article is needed before abstract nouns.
  - Education is important. (The speaker is talking about the abstract concept of education which is something that can only be thought of and not physically sensed.)
- Most proper nouns do not need an article.
  - Brazil is the largest country in South America. (Country and continent names are proper nouns that do not need an article before them.)
  - She can speak Spanish and French. (Language names are also proper nouns that do not need an article.)

Exceptions. Although most proper nouns do not need an article, there are several exceptions to this rule. Some examples of the most common types of exceptions are given below:

- Dutch is the official language of the Netherlands. (Use a definite article before the name of a country or geographical location if the name suggests that it contains separate regions or areas.)
- The climate is warmer in the South. (Use a definite article before the name of a specific region or area.)
- The Pacific Ocean is the largest ocean in the world. (A definite article is needed before the names of oceans, as well as deserts and rivers.)
- The University of Pennsylvania is a strong research institution. (A definite article is used before college and university names when “university” or “college” is the first word in the name.)
- **The Natural History Museum is located in Washington, D.C.** (Use a definite article before the names of museums and libraries.)

**Flowchart**

The flowchart below, featured in the worksheet *Articles!* by the Connors Writing Center at the University of New Hampshire, shows the basic process of choosing an article:

1. **Start with a NOUN**
   - Is the noun referring to a **SPECIFIC** object, place, or thing?
     - Yes
       - **Is it the NAME of someone or something?**
         - Yes
           - Use **THE**
             - *Ex: Please put the sugar on the table.*
         - No
           - Use **NO ARTICLE** (usually...)
             - *Ex: George Washington Sprint Wireless*
     - No
       - **Can you COUNT the noun?**
         - Yes
           - **Is the noun SINGULAR or PLURAL?**
             - Singular
               - Use **A** or **AN**
                 - *Ex: Can you buy me a cup of coffee?*
             - Plural
               - Use **NO ARTICLE**
                 - *Ex: Students should bring pencils to class.*
         - No
           - Use **NO ARTICLE**
             - *Ex: Please buy sugar at the store.*
Practice Exercise

Directions: Fill in the blank with the appropriate article, a, an, or the, or leave the space blank if no article is needed.

1. I want ____ apple from that basket.

2. ____ church on the corner is progressive.

3. Miss Lin speaks ____ Chinese.

4. I borrowed ____ pencil from your pile of pencils and pens.

5. One of the students said, "____ professor is late today."

6. Eli likes to play ____ volleyball.

7. I bought ____ umbrella to go out in the rain.

8. My daughter is learning to play ____ violin at her school.

9. Please give me ____ cake that is on the counter.

10. I lived on ____ Main Street when I first came to town.

11. Albany is the capital of ____ New York State.

12. My husband's family speaks ____ Polish.

13. ____ apple a day keeps the doctor away.

14. ____ ink in my pen is red.

15. Our neighbors have ____ cat and ____ dog.
Correct answers are in bold.

1. I want an apple from that basket.
2. The church on the corner is progressive.
3. Miss Lin speaks Chinese. (no article needed)
4. I borrowed a pencil from your pile of pencils and pens.
5. One of the students said, "The professor is late today."
6. Eli likes to play volleyball. (no article needed)
7. I bought an umbrella to go out in the rain.
8. My daughter is learning to play the violin at her school.
9. Please give me the cake that is on the counter.
10. I lived on Main Street when I first came to town. (no article needed)
11. Albany is the capital of New York State. (no article needed)
12. My husband's family speaks Polish. (no article needed)
13. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
14. The ink in my pen is red.
15. Our neighbors have a cat and a dog.

This exercise was originally published by the Purdue OWL.
Additional Resources

Below are links to websites with more information about articles as well as quizzes and worksheets:

Guide to Grammar and Writing – This website explains article use and includes practice quizzes.

ELC Study Zone – This website has information about article use.

Activities for ESL Students – This website has several quizzes about articles.

Articles: Grammar Practice Worksheets – This worksheet has exercises for practicing article use.