

## 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: [ju:]) 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 [ju:], 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.)

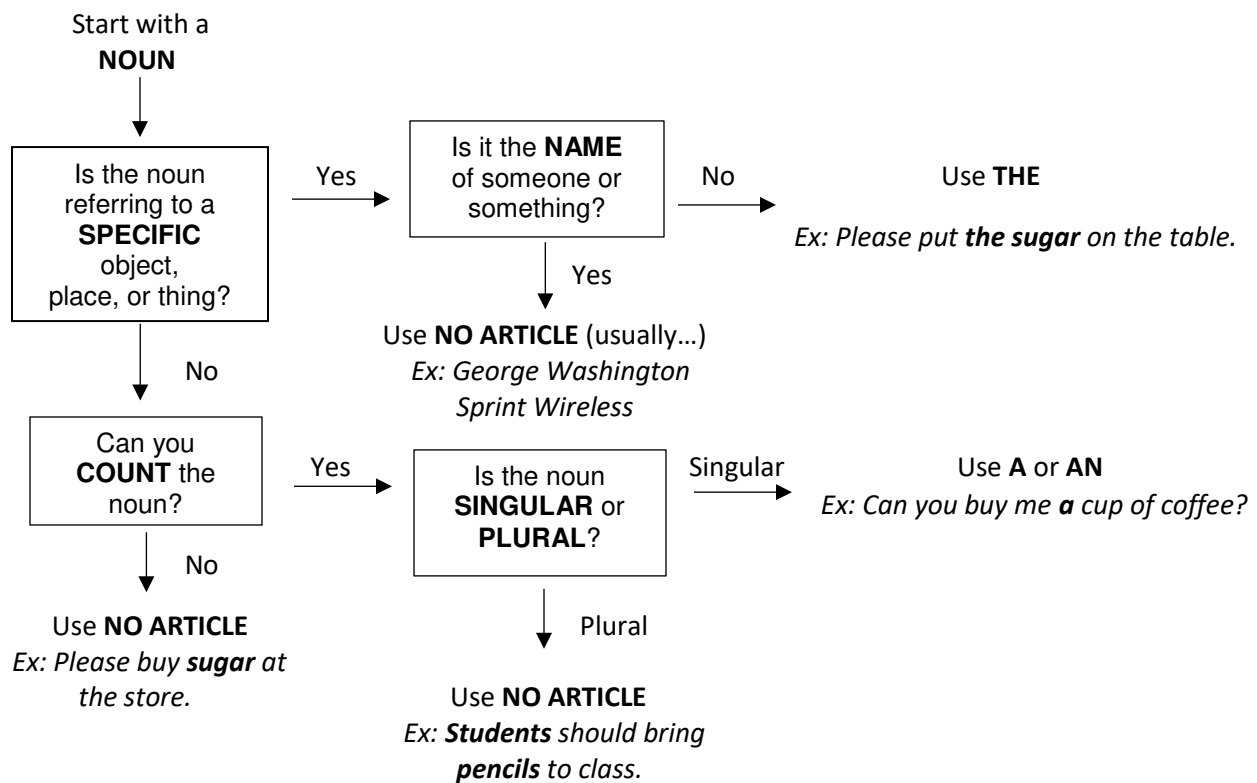
**Exceptions.** Although most proper nouns do not need an article, there are several exceptions to this rule. Some examples of the most common types of exceptions are given below:

- **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:



## 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.