

“The,” “A” and “An”:

An English Language Learner’s Guide to Using Articles

“The” is the most frequently used word in the English language; however, it can be one of the most difficult words to use correctly if English is not your first language. Why is this the case? How do you use this sort of word correctly? Read on to discover answers to these questions and concrete examples to help improve your writing

What is an Article?

Grammatically, **articles** belong to a class of words called **determiners**, which are words that modify nouns. There are three types of determiners:

1. **Possessive Determiners:** my, our, your, his, her, its, their
2. **Demonstratives:** this/these and that/those
3. **Articles:** Definite article (the) and indefinite articles (a, an)

Grammar Rule #1: Noun phrases in English can only have only one determiner.

Test Your Understanding

Which of the following sentences is grammatically incorrect in light of the grammatical rule for using determiners?

1. *I like that yellow cat*
or
2. *I like that the yellow cat*

ANSWER: Sentence number 2 – “I like that the yellow cat” – is grammatically incorrect because two determiners (that and the) are used to modify one noun phrase (yellow cat).

Why are articles problematic for English language learners?

Articles can be especially difficult to grasp and master for English as a second or other language writers because many other languages structure their determiner phrases differently. It is hard to acquire the use of articles in another language if your first language does not use them.

Did you know?

Many Indo-European languages (like German, Spanish, Italian and French) have both definite and indefinite articles; however, other languages, like Arabic, have definite but not indefinite articles. Still other languages, like Chinese and Japanese, do not use articles at all.

What are the English Grammar Rules for Using Articles?

First, it is important to remember that *articles, in English, are used to give meaning in the context of sentences*. This means that it is important to consider the meaning of the larger noun

phrase (the noun and its determiners), as well as the sentence as a whole, when deciding when to use an article and which article to use.

Grammar Rule #2: “A” or “An” are used to modify a reference to a *single, indefinite (general) count noun*.

- “Single” refers to a noun that exists in its singular form (ie: apple, not apples). The words “a” and “an” are derived from the word “one” and can only be used if there is one of something (that can be counted). *Plural general count nouns* do not require an article.
- “Indefinite” or “General” means that the noun is referencing something general as opposed to specific one (ie: all dogs as opposed to my particular pet dog Jerome).
- A “count noun” is a noun that can be counted, meaning it exists in either a singular or plural form (ie: dog could be dogs, report/reports, idea/ideas).

Which is it – “A” or “An”?

If the next word in the sentence begins with a vowel sound (ie: apple), “an” must be used (ie: an apple). “A” is used in all other cases. If you are unsure, try reading the word out loud to catch that initial sound.

Grammar Rule #3: “The” is used to modify a reference to a *single or plural definite (specific) count or non-count noun*.

- “The” is used when a writer wishes to signify a definite, or specific, noun – often something or someone that has been previously introduced in the sentence – rather than talking about a general concept or category.
- For example, in this phrase: “*the dog is brown,*” a specific dog is referenced as opposed to all dogs in general. Also consider these examples:
 - “The reports are due tomorrow”
 - “The ground is wet”
 - “The research is about globalization.”

Each of these phrases makes a reference to a singular or plural noun whose meaning is to be taken, in context, as *specific*, not general.

Quick Reference Table*

	COMMON NOUNS		PROPER NOUNS (ie: Names/Places)
	Count Nouns		Definite in and of themselves
	Singular	Plural	
Indefinite (general)	a/an	No article	No article needed to mark definiteness.
Definite (specific)	the	the	

*Table reproduced from Deckert (2009) pg. 110.