

Articles are used to announce nouns, and they belong to the grammatical category of noun markers or determiners. Articles will always come before nouns. Also, any modifiers that appear between the article and the noun refers directly to that noun. In order to use articles properly, it is important to understand what type of noun one is dealing with and the difference between the three articles. You must first decide whether the noun you are working with is specific or nonspecific.

**Key Terms for Understanding Articles:**

**Indefinite articles** – *A* and *an* are indefinite articles and are used with nouns that are not specific (i.e., a pen, a box, a book—not a specific or particular one, but any pen, box, or book).

The article *a* means “among a lot of others” or “one specific and particular item,” such as *a* rocket, *a* mailbox, or *a* person.

The article *an* also means “among a lot of others” or “one specific and particular item,” but *an* will precede words that begin with a vowel sound, such as *an* ox, *an* honor, *an* honest man.

**Definite articles** – *The* is a definite article and refers to a specific noun (i.e., *the* book, *the* box, or *the* pen).

**Count nouns** – Nouns that can be counted. They can be in singular or plural form—for example, one cat, two cats, four cows, ten books.

**Non-count nouns** – Nouns that cannot be counted because they are considered as *wholes*. They always appear in singular form—for example, beef, water, advice, information, rice, gasoline, violence. Although some non-count nouns may be countable in another language, if they are not countable in English, they remain non-count nouns.

**Count OR non-count nouns** – Some nouns can be used as both count nouns (where the meaning is specific and concrete) and non-count nouns (where the meaning is general and abstract): “I turned on all the lights” vs. “The light came through the window.”

**Generalizations** – When using plural nouns in a generalized sense, do not use *the*—for example, “Elephants live longer than zebras” not “The elephants live longer than the zebras.” Notice, however, that one can use *the* with a singular form that refers to a general class: “The elephant lives longer than the zebra” and “The computer has transformed modern life” (computers in general, not a specific computer).

**Gerunds** – Grammatically, a gerund is a present participle used as a noun (the *-ing* form of the verb). Generally, gerunds are not preceded by *the*. For example, we say “Running is difficult” not “The running is difficult.” You will not use *the* before a gerund when the gerund has a direct object: “Designing fabric is a fine art” [fabric is a direct object of designing, so *the* should not be used]. You will use *the* with a gerund when the gerund is followed by a prepositional phrase: “The designing of fabric is a fine art” [*the* is used because fabric is the object of the preposition “of” and designing is meant in a specific sense].

**WHEN A SINGULAR COUNT NOUN IS SPECIFIC AND REQUIRES THE**

**Rule 1:** A noun is specific and requires *the* when it names something unique or generally known.

Example: The stars lit his way. [Because “stars” is a noun that is generally known, it is a specific noun in the context of this sentence.]

**Rule 2:** A noun is specific and requires *the* when it names something used in a representative or abstract sense.

Example: The termite is actually a fascinating insect. [Because “termite” is a representative reference rather than a reference to a particular termite, it is a specific noun in the context of this sentence.]

**Rule 3:** A noun is specific and requires *the* when it names something defined elsewhere in the same sentence or in an earlier sentence.

Example: The disease malaria is a serious threat in some parts of the world. [The word “malaria” means a specific disease.]

Example: The face in the painting startled me. [The phrase “in the painting” defines exactly which face is meant, so “face” is a specific noun in this context.]

Example: I know a good place to eat. The place is around the corner. [“Place” is not specific in the first sentence, so it uses *a*. In the second sentence, “place” has been made specific by the first sentence, so it uses *the*.]

**Rule 4:** A noun is specific and requires *the* when it names something that can be inferred from the context.

Example: The chef is excellent. [If this sentence follows the two sentences about a “place” in Rule 3 above, then “chef” is specific in this context.]

**PROPER NOUNS THAT USE THE**

Nouns with the pattern *the . . . of . . .*

Examples: the United States of America  
the Fourth of July

Plural proper nouns

Examples: the Smoky Mountains [but Mount Everest]  
the Great Lakes [but Lake Michigan]  
the Los Angeles Dodgers  
the Smiths

Collective proper nouns (nouns that name a group)

Examples: the League of Women Voters  
the Sierra Club

Some (but not all) geographical features

Examples: the Amazon River  
the Atlantic Ocean  
the Sahara Desert

You can learn more about articles [here](#).

