

ARTICLE USAGE: A, AN, and THE

The definite article “THE” is used for a variety purposes, but writers usually use it before nouns (people, places, things, ideas, concepts) that are known to both the writer and reader. Therefore, the noun must have already been introduced. The exception to this rule is when the writer assumes the reader will know the noun.

“A” AND “AN” are indefinite articles. We say “indefinite” because a/an are used in front of singular (countable) nouns that are undefined or not specifically known to the writer and reader.

There are a number of instances when writers should not use an article. As with the indefinite a/an, writers usually do not use an article (officially called the ZERO ARTICLE) before an undefined uncountable* noun or before plural countable nouns.

*NOTE: A noun is “uncountable” if you cannot count it. In English, we cannot, for example, count advice: not *one advice, *two advices. Instead, we might count units of advice: one piece of advice. Usually nouns like anger, water, bread, or sunshine are not countable. Instead of counting these nouns, we might count **units** of them: a **slice** of bread/**slices** of bread). These units are approximate measurements.

THE

SUBSEQUENT MENTION: <i>The</i> usually appears before a noun that has already been introduced. In this example, the woman has already been introduced in the first sentence, so she is known to both the writer and the reader by the subsequent mention.	EXAMPLE: <i>A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. <u>The woman</u> is expected to fully recover.</i>
INDIRECT SUBSEQUENT USE: <i>The</i> often appears before a noun that is closely associated with another noun already introduced. The motorcycle was introduced in the first sentence, so the reader should know there must have been a motorcyclist.	EXAMPLE, cont’d: <i>The motorcyclist, however, is in critical condition.</i>
USE WITH SYNONYMS: <i>The</i> often appears with synonyms for an noun that has already been introduced.	EXAMPLE cont’d: <i>Police say alcohol may have played a role in <u>the accident</u>.</i>
CATAPHORIC USE: A noun is sometimes defined (made definite) immediately after it is mentioned in a text. In this example, “to the accident” defines the witness.	EXAMPLE cont’d: <i>The witness <u>to the accident</u> said the intersection <u>where the accident took place</u> is considered dangerous.</i>
SITUATIONAL USE: Usually in speech, but occasionally in writing, the situation (context) creates shared knowledge between the writer and the reader. In the example below, the number is visible to the reader.	EXAMPLE cont’d: <i>If anyone else has information about the accident, please contact the police at <u>the following number</u>: 555-555-5555.</i>
USE WITH PLURAL PROPER NOUNS: For proper nouns (names of people, places, and concrete or abstract things) that are plural (consist of more than one), <i>the</i> is often used.	EXAMPLES: <i>the United States, the United Kingdom, the Simpsons, all the Davids in class, the Rolling Stones, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.</i>

A/AN

FIRST MENTION: <i>a/an</i> usually appears before a singular common noun (not a proper noun, like Steve, and not a pronoun, like he, but a common noun, like <i>boy</i>) when mentioning it for the first time in speech or in writing. <i>A</i> is only used the first time that the woman is mentioned.	EXAMPLE: <i>A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by <u>a motorcycle</u>. <u>The woman</u> is expected to fully recover.</i>
SPECIFIC USE: <i>A</i> and <i>an</i> are used to introduce a specific, but	EXAMPLE: <i>The university found a new</i>

still unknown member of a group. (If the member is unknown, it probably was not mentioned yet, so this is first mention.) In the example below, the group is “presidents” and the specific president has been chosen, so “president” is specific.	<i>president.</i>
UNSPECIFIC USE: <i>A</i> and <i>an</i> are “used to refer to one <i>non-specific</i> or <i>non-particular</i> member of a group” (Owl at Purdue). In the example below, the group is “presidents” but the specific president has not been chosen, so “president” is unspecified.	EXAMPLE: <i>The university is looking for a new president.</i>
CLASSIFICATION: <i>A</i> and <i>an</i> are used to refer to one member from a class or group that it belongs to. In this example, “president” is a member (<i>one published author</i>) from a class/group (<i>any/all published authors</i>).	EXAMPLE: <i>The university’s new president is a published author.</i>
GENERIC REFERENCE: <i>A</i> and <i>an</i> can be used with a noun that serves as an example for the entire class/group. In the first example below, “a mother” means “all/every/any mothers.”	EXAMPLES: <i>A mother knows her children. (It means, “All/any mothers know their children.”)</i>

**ZERO ARTICLE
(OR WHEN NOT TO USE AN ARTICLE) for indefinite meaning**

COUNTABLE and PLURAL NOUNS: In this example, <i>bread</i> is an uncountable noun (<i>not one bread</i> or <i>two breads</i>), but we can count <i>Sundays</i> (<i>one Sunday</i> , <i>two Sundays</i>). The word <i>Sundays</i> is plural, therefore, we don’t use an article.	EXAMPLE: <i>I like baking bread on Sundays.</i>
INSTITUTIONS: English writers can discuss institutions without counting them in certain contexts. English speakers may consider many nouns as institutions, including meals (breakfast), places (home, outside, nature), industries, disciplines, programs, and more (mathematics, literature, engineering, IT, public health, social security).	EXAMPLES: <i>After I come home from school, I eat lunch, but then I have to leave for work. I wish I knew more about Latin American literature.</i>
TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION: English writers don’t use an article before transportation, communication tools, or machines if they are used with a preposition: <i>by car</i> , <i>by computer</i> , <i>over e-mail</i> , <i>by phone</i> , <i>via videoconference</i> , <i>via satellite</i> , <i>through discussion</i> .	EXAMPLES: <i>I wrote this by hand. Are they traveling here by plane or by car? Instead of talking by phone, let’s try to solve this problem through face-to-face discussion at our next meeting.</i>
TIMES: English writers usually discuss nouns of time with <i>Zero article</i> if they are used with a preposition: <i>at noon</i> , <i>at 3:00</i> , <i>by 5:00</i> , <i>by tomorrow</i> , <i>after Sunday</i> , <i>at sunrise</i> , <i>in winter</i> .	EXAMPLES: <i>In winter, I get up at sunrise because the winter sunrises are beautiful. In fact, I once saw a sunrise that was bright orange.</i>
SPECIAL POSITIONS: When referring to some special jobs, English speakers can use either <i>the</i> or the zero article.	EXAMPLES: <i>Mike Myers was elected chairmen. Mike Myers was elected the chairmen.</i>
PARALLELISM: Sometimes the zero article is used when comparing or contrasting undefined nouns that the writer thinks are similar or contrast each other.	EXAMPLES: <i>She moves from city to city. Mother and baby are doing well.</i>
VOCATIVES: Vocatives are titles. When addressing an individual directly by title or name, do not use an article.	EXAMPLES: <i>Doctor, do you need your stethoscope? Mom, I have a headache.</i>
BLOCK LANGUAGE: Block language is used in some news headlines, labels, and on short messages or notes in order to save space, so articles may not be used.	EXAMPLES: <i>Man saves puppy from crocodile jaws. Please pick up new shower curtain for bathroom. Mailbox is full.</i>

WORKS CONSULTED

Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Leech, G. (2007). *Student grammar of spoken and written English*. Essex, England: Pearson Education.