



## ARTICLES

English has two articles: the and a/an. *The* is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; a/an is used to modify non-specific or non-particular nouns. We call *the* the *definite* article and a/an the *indefinite* article.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article

Here's another way to explain it: *The* is used to refer to a *specific* or *particular* member of a group. For example, "I just saw the most popular movie of the year." There are many movies, but only one particular movie is the most popular. Therefore, we use *the*.

"A/an" is used to refer to a *non-specific* or *non-particular* member of the group. For example, "I would like to go see a movie." Here, we're not talking about a *specific* movie. We're talking about *any* movie. There are many movies, and I want to see *any* movie. I don't have a specific one in mind.

### Indefinite Articles: a and an

"A" and "an" signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. For example:

- "My daughter really wants a dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog. We don't know which dog because we haven't found the dog yet.
- "Somebody call a policeman!" This refers to *any* policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.
- "When I was at the zoo, I saw an elephant!" Here, we're talking about a single, non-specific thing, in this case an elephant. There are probably several elephants at the zoo, but there's only *one* we're talking about here.

### Definite Article: the

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. The signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. For example:

"The dog that bit me ran away." Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.

"I was happy to see the policeman who saved my cat!" Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.

**Articles** are a kind of noun marker, they limit a nouns reference point (although they do not provide particularly descriptive information. Using articles can be a very challenging aspect of English for non-native speakers. The following "article map" lays out the "rules" for using articles with nouns.

Is it a proper noun? → → Yes → → Zero article  
No

Is there a unique referent? → → Yes → → the  
No

Is it countable? → → No → → Zero Article  
Yes

Is it singular? → → No → → Zero Article  
Yes → a (an)

Use *an* when the noun starts with a vowel sound

Now doing your best to repress your knowledge of English, apply the above rules to the following dialogue.

Good morning, \_\_ Sam.  
It looks like \_\_ nice day.  
Is there any coffee left?  
Here's \_\_ cup. Do you take anything with it?  
Just \_\_ sugar if you have it.  
There was \_\_ John Grisham looking for you.  
Not \_\_ John Grisham, \_\_ famous writer.  
I'm not sure. \_\_ secretary talked to him.

As you will note, our wonderful articles rules will often break down. The issues of countability and non countability, singular or plural, proper or common noun are not clear cut, and the use of an article depends on the situation and perspective of the speaker/ writer and reader/ listener.

For more help with articles visit the following links:

- 1.) How to use articles; <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/>
- 2.) Article Exercises; follow ESL Challenges link, continue to links for article exercises  
<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/Player/Pages/Main.aspx>