

Campus Academic Resource Program

A Guide to Articles

This handout will:

- Define articles.
- Differentiate between definite and indefinite articles.
- Discuss common instances of when to use an article.
- Explore exceptions for not using an article.
- Practice how to use articles in your writing.

Articles are a specific type of adjective. Like other adjectives they modify nouns, but do so in a subtler way than most adjectives. The difference between “chocolate lab” and “yellow lab” is more readily understood than the difference between “the lab” and “a lab.”

Below, the broad rules for articles are outlined along with more specific issues. With all of these rules, there are many exceptions.

English has two articles: *The*

- *The* refers to specific or particular nouns; it is called the *definite* article.

Specific uses of the definite article (*The*)

- Referring to a particular group of people united by nationality.
 - “**The** English are not known for their culinary skills.”
 - “**The** Chinese will grow increasingly influential in world affairs.”
- Used when the listener or reader knows which particular person, place, or thing the speaker’s talking about.
 - “I had to take **the** dog to the vet.”
 - Here, the speaker refers to a specific dog, which the listener is presumably familiar with.
- Used with certain nouns when we know there is only one of this specific thing.
 - **The** sun, **the** world, **the** earth, **the** sky, **the** environment.
- Used before oceans, rivers, points on the globe, *some* geographical regions, deserts, forests, gulfs, peninsulas.
 - **The** Pacific Ocean
 - **The** Amazon River
 - **The** Sahara Desert
 - **The** Equator, the South Pole
 - **The** West, **The** Middle East
 - **The** Persian Gulf
 - **The** Iberian Peninsula
- Multipliers and fractional expressions are often followed by *the*.
 - “They made double **the** profit in the third quarter.”
 - “One third of **the** survey’s respondents disapproved of the president’s performance.”

English has two articles: *A/An*

- *A/An* modify non-specific or non-particular nouns; it is called the *indefinite* article.
 - Use *a* when the following word begins with a consonant.
 - Use *an* when the following word begins with a vowel.

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Specific uses of the indefinite article (*A/An*)

- Use *a* before a word that starts with a consonant, and use *an* before a word that starts with a vowel.
 - **an** apple
 - **a** European (even though “European” begins with a vowel, it makes a consonant *sound*, therefore **a** is used instead).
 - **a** use of technology is...
 - **a** unique historical perspective...
 - **a** eulogy was given...
- Use the indefinite article the first time you refer to a noun, and the definite article for subsequent mentions.
 - “I saw what turned out to be **a** deer when I was on my hike. As soon as I made eye contact, **the** deer ran away.”
- Very rarely will an indefinite article be used if the noun it refers to cannot be counted (meaning the noun can’t be made plural).
 - Nouns like capitalism, socialism, air, etc. require an indefinite article only in very rare situations.
 - “Stalinism represented **a** socialism stripped of its democratic characteristics.” vs. the more common usage, “Socialism is **a** very controversial concept in the United States.”
- Use with intensifiers.
 - “What **an** idiot! He presented such **a** terrible idea.”
 - “They made quite **a** fuss over the conditions.”

Comparing article usage

- “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*.
- “I would like to go see **a** movie.”
 - Here, no particular movie is specified. The speaker wants to see any movie, so we use *a*.
- “Movies are my favorite type of entertainment.”
 - Here, the word “movies” is meant to be very inclusive, referring to all movies as a group in a general sense. Therefore, no article is used.
- Not every noun needs an article, so there are in fact four choices: *the*, *a*, *an*, and *no article*. In general, don’t use an article if speaking of a group in a general sense or with an abstract noun (happiness, weakness, credibility, capitalism).

When *not* to use an article

- A pronoun (*my*, *your*, *his*, *their*, etc.) precedes the noun.
 - “Their dogs are well-behaved.”
 - “I think he’s losing his mind.”
- Referring to a country or continent.
 - “I’ve never been to China or Greenland.”

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- Examples of exceptions: **the** United Arab Emirates, **the** United States, **the** United Kingdom, **the** Americas, **the** People's Republic of China.
- Referring to a language.
 - “Even though it was his fourth language, Conrad is considered a master of English prose.”
- Speaking of a group in a general sense.
 - “Cats make the best pets.”
 - *The* isn't used to modify “cats,” so it isn't used as an article in this sentence.
- Before someone's name.
 - “I spoke to Jill yesterday.”
- Referring to sports.
 - “Soccer is the most popular sport in the world.”
- Referring to cities, town, states/provinces.
 - “San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland are my favorite cities in California.”
- Referring to names of mountains.
 - Mount Everest.
 - Exception: use *the* when referring to mountain ranges.
 - **The** Himalayas, **the** Rocky Mountains.
- Referring to names of islands.
 - Jamaica, Martinique
 - Exception: use *the* when referring to island chains.
 - **the** Lesser Antilles, **the** Cayman Islands

The Articles Map

- The following “map” is often used to help people learn how to use English articles. As with all the rules in this handout, there are exceptions, but it's a useful tool nonetheless.

Is it a proper noun? → → Yes → → **Zero article**

No

Is there a unique referent? (i.e., is the noun unique/specific/particular) → → 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

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Exercise 1

The following passage has all articles removed from it. Practice proof-reading for articles mistakes by going through and adding the correct article where appropriate.

In truth, Jacobo Arbenz was 1)___ peaceful reformer who owed much more to Keynesian thought than communism. Consequently, Latin American leftists took as 2)___ lesson from Arbenz's Guatemala that meaningful change could only be won by force. 3)___ CIA coup in Guatemala served as 4)___ justification for Castro and Guevara's actions in Cuba and contributed directly to 5)___ Marxist guerrilla movement in Guatemala that erupted into 6)___ nearly four decade long civil war. 7) ___ historian Greg Grandin argues that 8)___ coup against Arbenz, not 9)___ Cuban Revolution, marks 10)___ true turning point in US-Latin American Cold War relations for these very reasons. 11)___ narrative then changes from one of Americans responding to communist expansion in their "backyard" to one of American aggression encouraging radical armed resistance.

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Exercise 2

Fill in the blank with *a*, *an*, *the*, or *no* article. In a few of these example problems, more than one choice works, but the sentence's meaning will change slightly based on which article is used.

- 1) I watched ___ TV last night.
- 2) I bought ___ new TV yesterday.
- 3) Would you like ___ bowl of ___ soup?
- 4) I spoke with ___ Jack yesterday.
- 5) I had to write ___ essay last night.
- 6) Our professor assigned ___ essay ages ago, but I forgot until yesterday.
- 7) All he does is sit in front of ___ TV.
- 8) ___ D/dogs make the best pets.
- 9) ___ D/dobermans are her favorite ___ breed of ___ dog.
- 10) At least ___ gift was thoughtful.
- 11) At least it was ___ thoughtful gift.
- 12) ___ F/ flavor was overwhelming.
- 13) Would you like ___ coffee or ___ tea?
- 14) I'd like ___ coffee.
- 15) Do you take it with ___ sugar?
- 16) I need ___ drink.
- 17) ___ D/drinks are on me.
- 18) ___ US government deports hundreds of thousands of ___ immigrants every year.
- 19) ___ US government policy marginalizes ___ immigrants.
- 20) In ___ ten years following Pinochet's coup, ___ 177,000 jobs in ___ industry were lost; by ___ mid-1980s, ___ manufacturing's share of Chile's economy was comparable to what it had been in ___ 1940s.

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Key--Exercise 1

In truth, Arbenz was **1) a** peaceful reformer who owed much more to Keynesian thought than communism. Consequently, Latin American leftists took as **2) a** lesson from Arbenz's Guatemala that meaningful change could only be won by force. **3) The** CIA coup in Guatemala served as **4) a** justification for Castro and Guevara's actions in Cuba and contributed directly to **5) a** Marxist guerrilla movement in Guatemala that erupted into **6) a** nearly four decade long civil war. **7) The** historian Greg Grandin argues that **8) the** coup against Arbenz, not **9) the** Cuban Revolution, marks **10) the** true turning point in US-Latin American Cold War relations for these very reasons. **11) The** narrative then changes from one of Americans responding to communist expansion in their "backyard" to one of American aggression encouraging radical armed resistance.

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Key—Exercise 2

1) no article

2) a

3) a, no article

4) no article

5) an *or* the. Use “an” if speaking to someone who does not know what essay you’re referring to and “the” if speaking to someone who is familiar with the particular assignment.

6) the

7) the

8) no article

9) no article, no article, no article

10) the

11) a

12) The

13) no article, no article

14) no article *or* a; use of “a” is more colloquial

15) no article

16) a

17) no article

18) The, no article

19) no article, no article

20) the, no article, no article (if this were referring to one specific industry, rather than all industry, then “the” would be appropriate), the, no article, the

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Works Cited

Purdue OWL, “Articles,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/exercises/2/1/> (Accessed March 24, 2014).

Paul Lynch, Allen Brizee, Elizabeth Angeli, “Using Articles,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/> (Accessed March 24, 2014).