

## Basic Use of Articles

The articles “a,” “an,” and “the” are adjectives because they modify nouns. In the English language, when a noun takes an “a” or an “an,” nouns beginning with vowels typically use “an” while all other nouns use “a.” An exception to this rule is nouns beginning with U when it sounds like Y, such as “a” user, “a” uniform, or “a” universal truth. Aside from this minor complication, 3 basic circumstances determine which article should be used.

### 1. Can the noun that follows the article be counted?

**“A” and “an” are used if the noun can be counted.**

- Example: I ran a mile.
- Explanation: A mile is a countable increment of 5280 feet.
- Example: An airplane flew overhead.
- Explanation: Airplanes come in many sizes and types and can be individually counted. “The” airplane flew overhead refers to a specific airplane and falls under condition #2 below.

**Use “the” if the noun cannot be counted or numbered.**

- Example: The weather is foreboding and getting worse.
- Explanation: There is only one weather possible at a time, and you cannot “count” weathers. (“A” weather is impossible.)

### 2. Is the noun specific (definite) or general (indefinite)?

**Use “the” when the noun is a distinct, specific member of a class.**

- Example: The car will not start.
- Explanation: This implies a particular car – the writer’s car, not a random car parked on the street.
- Example: The kids from down the street are starting trouble again.
- Explanation: This refers to a specific group of kids, not all kids, certainly not my kids, but a known group of troublemakers.

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**Use “a” or “an” when the noun is a general member of a class, not a specific, known member.**

- Example: A strange dog just ran through my yard.
- Explanation: I didn’t recognize the dog, but it was definitely some kind of dog. “The” strange dog is that shaggy dog that always tips over our garbage cans; I don’t know his name, but he’s a weirdo.
- Example: An elephant would make a poor house pet.
- Explanation: There may be an elephant somewhere that would work as a housepet, but as an entire class of species, elephants generally don’t like confinement and shag carpet.

**3. Is the noun being introduced for the first time, or has it been mentioned already?**

**Use “a” or “an” when the noun is first introduced, then use *the* when it appears thereafter.**

- Example: We threw a big party in Matilda’s honor. We put up decorations and hired a Journey cover band to play. The party ended at midnight.
- Explanation: The first article establishes that of all the parties taking place in the world at that moment, Matilda’s party is the party we’re concerned with. We can now assume everything that follows about parties is about Matilda’s party, so we use the definite article “the” until a different party is mentioned.