**Articles**

**“The”** and **“a/an”**

**“The”** is used to identify specific nouns.   
Examples:

* You should eat **the** red apple.
* I want to read **the** book she recommended.
* Where is **the** blue car?

In these sentences, **“the”** is used to note particular nouns. We can imagine that the apple is perhaps the only apple, or the only apple that is red.

**“A/An”** are used to identify indefinite nouns, or general nouns that do not focus on something specific.

Remember that **“a”** is used only before words beginning with a consonant. Consonants: B, C, D, F, G, H, K, L, M, N, P, Q, R, S, T, V, W, X, and Z.

Examples:

* I want **a** dog.
* I saw **a** murderous clown.
* We need **a** piece of pie!

In these examples, the nouns are only general, not specific. These people want any dog or any piece of pie. Similarly, someone saw “a murderous clown,” not that specific clown you saw in an alley late last night.

**“An”** is used before a word that begins with a vowel or a vowel sound.

Remember that vowels are: A, E, I, O, and U. (This is one time when Y does not count. I ate the apple a year ago.)

Examples:

* You should eat **an** apple every day.
* We expected you over **an** hour ago.
* I attended **an** evening class this semester.

Notice that the nouns after **“an”** do not necessarily begin with a vowel, but a vowel sound. The word “hour” requires “an” because the “h” is silent; “hour” makes a distinct “ou” sound. **“A”** also becomes **“an”** when the adjective has a vowel sound, like the example “an evening class.”

**Count and Non-count Nouns**

Whether or not a noun is countable is also an important factor in determining whether to use **“A/an”** or **“the.”** A count noun is a noun that can become plural, while a non-count noun is a noun that we would not typically make plural. A good trick to follow is the rule that non-count nouns cannot use **“a/an.”**

Examples:

Count Nouns: Article, bagel, word, staple, author, potato chip. All of these nouns have the potential to become plural nouns, so **“a/an”** may be applicable.

Non-count Nouns: Water, cheese, ice cream, knowledge, beauty, grammar. We would not say grammars or waters, so **“the”** may be applicable.

* Remember also that some nouns may not need an article at all. If you can, try reading your work out loud to catch errors in article usage. If you’re still unsure, ask a writing tutor or fellow student for their perspective.

Resources Available on the Writing Center Bookshelf:

* *Painless Grammar* by Rebecca Elliot, Ph.D.
* *Grammar To Go: How it Works and How to Use It* by Barbara Goldstein, Jack Waugh, and Karen Linsky
* *Kirszner & Mandell: The Brief Wadsworth Handbook*
* *ESL Writers,* “A(n)/The/~~O~~,” edited by Shanti Bruce & Ben Rafoth

Resources Available Online:

* Purdue OWL’s “Using Articles.” https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\_writing/grammar/using\_articles.html
* Grammar Girl’s “When to Use Articles Before Nouns.” https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/when-to-use-articles-before-nouns
* Grammar Girl’s “A Versus An” https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/a-versus-an

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