

ARTICLES

“A, An and The” are called Articles, and we use these articles to make a noun 'definite' or 'indefinite'. The student has to decide noun-by-noun which one of the articles to use. In fact, there are 4 choices to make, because sometimes no article is necessary. The most important first step in choosing the correct article is to categorize the noun as count or uncount in its context. Once you have correctly categorized the noun (using your dictionary if necessary), the following "rules" apply:

1. Uncount nouns

You cannot say a/an with an uncount noun.

You cannot put a number in front of an uncount noun. (You cannot make an uncount noun plural.)

You use an uncount noun with no article if you mean that thing in general.

You use an uncount with noun when you are talking about a particular example of that thing.

2. Count nouns

You can put a number in front of a count noun. (You can make a count noun plural.)

You can put both a/an and the in front of a count noun.

You must put an article in front of a singular count noun.

You use a plural count noun with no article if you mean all or any of that thing.

You usually use a/an with a count noun the first time you say or write that noun.

You use the with count nouns: the second and subsequent times you use the noun in a piece of speech or writing when the listener knows what you are referring to (maybe because there is only one of that thing) You use an (not a) when the next word (adverb, adjective, noun) starts with a vowel sound.

3. A is used when the next word begins with a consonant sound (b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k etc).

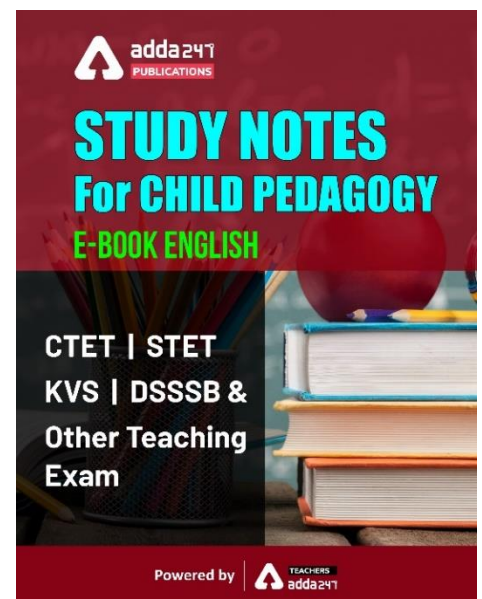
a book, a table, a clock, a university (because the beginning of university sounds like YOU-university)

4. AN is used when the next word begins with a vowel sound (a, e, i, o, u).

an apple, an elephant, an umbrella, an hour (because the H is silent)

Omission of Articles

Occasionally, articles are omitted altogether before certain nouns. In these cases, the article is implied but not actually present. This implied article is sometimes called a “zero article.”



5. Often, the article is omitted before nouns that refer to abstract ideas. Look at the following examples:

Let's go out for a dinner tonight. (Incorrect)

Let's go out for dinner tonight. (correct)

The creativity is a valuable quality in children. (Incorrect)

Creativity is a valuable quality in children. (correct)

6. Many languages and nationalities are not preceded by an article. Consider the example below:

I studied the French in high school for four years. (Incorrect)

I studied French in high school for four years. (correct)

7. Sports and academic subjects do not require articles. See the sentences below for reference:

I like to play the baseball. (Incorrect)

I like to play baseball. (correct)

My sister was always good at the math. (Incorrect)

My sister was always good at math. (correct)

8. Use THE with nouns modified by ranking or ordering expressions such as "the first", "the second", "the third", "the next", "the last", "the previous", "the following", "the penultimate", etc.

This is the fifth day of our conference.

I'll pay the next time we have dinner.

Don't forget the following rule.

9. Use THE with superlatives such as "the best", "the biggest", "the most important", "the least interesting", etc.

This is the best day ever.

That is the most expensive hotel room I've ever heard of in my life.

He told the funniest joke!

10. Comparative forms, such as "bigger", "better", "more" can be used with both A(AN) and THE and follow general article usage.

I like the bigger roller coaster.

He has a more expensive car than I do.

11. However, THE is often used with comparative forms (bigger) rather than superlative forms (biggest) when comparing only two things. This is commonly used in phrases such as "the bigger of the two".

Jessie and Shauna are both smart. But I think Shauna is the smarter of the two.

Between Jason's son and his daughter, his daughter is the better athlete.



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12. If a direction (north, west, southeast, left, right) directly follows a verb, do not use an article with the direction.

We need to walk south.

They drove north all day.

At the stop sign, turn left and walk three blocks.

13. HOWEVER: If a direction follows a preposition, you must use THE.

We need to walk to the south.

Our house is in the north.

The grocery store is on the right.

14. THE can be used with plural family names to refer to the family as a group.

The Robinsons love to vacation in Florida.

The Shinoharas are originally from Japan.

My brother lives next door to the Jacksons.

15. THE can be combined with certain adjectives to refer to a group of people such as "the blind", "the elderly", "the rich", "the French", "the Sioux", etc.

He is elderly. (Adjective)

The organization helps the elderly. (Elderly people)

16. REMEMBER: This is especially important in situations where nationalities or ethnic groups and their languages might be confused. In such situations, THE is used to specify that we are talking about the nationality or ethnic group rather than the language.

I like French. (Language)

I like the French. (The French people)


17. Use THE with the names of:

Oceans, seas, coasts, rivers, swamps, archipelagos, collections of lakes (such as the Great Lakes), mountain chains, deserts, references on the globe (such as the Equator, the North Pole), geographic regions (such as the Northwest, the Middle East), bridges (except Tower Bridge), pagodas, hotels, theaters, museums, institutes, skyscrapers, the Sun, the Moon, extraordinary works of art or architecture (such as the Mona Lisa, the Colosseum, the Great Wall of China, and the Taj Mahal)

James visited the Hermitage, a famous museum in St. Petersburg.

I would love to visit the North Pole.

Nina walked over the Rialto Bridge.

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18. Time expressions can be especially confusing. THE is used in some time expressions such as:
in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, during the night, during the day, the day before yesterday, the day after tomorrow, the fall, the summer
We'll meet in the afternoon.
Jake loves to go camping in the fall.
There was a small earthquake during the night.

19. HOWEVER: In other time expressions, no article is used:
at night, at noon, at midnight, all day, all night, all month, every month, every year
last night, last Friday, yesterday, tomorrow.
Did you sleep well last night?
I'll see you tomorrow.
We are meeting for lunch at noon.

20. MOREOVER: There are some expressions which can take both A(AN) and THE such as:
a/the whole day, a/the whole month, an/the entire year, an/the entire decade
He spent a whole month in Hawaii. I wish I could do that.
I took last Friday off to go to the doctor. I spent the whole day sitting in his office.
When she first moved to Germany, it took an entire year for her to learn enough German to go shopping.
Phil hated the '90s. He spent the whole decade in a dead-end job struggling to pay his rent.

21. We use THE with-Musical instruments (the violin, the guitar, the drums, the flute, the piccolo).
She plays the piano.

22. We don't use A/AN with possessive pronouns, demonstratives or cardinal numbers.
My shirt is dirty.
This car is expensive.
One person is in the reception.

23. We use THE with: Something that is unique or there is only one.
The sun, The moon, The internet.

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