

**The Rules:**

**Articles are a kind of adjective** and, like adjectives, **articles give more information about the specific noun they modify.** *The article used depends on the nature and meaning of the noun.*

The indefinite articles (“a/an”) are used to modify a *singular noun*. **“A/an” is used to make a generalization or to refer to an object that has not yet been specifically identified or introduced to the reader.** “A” is used before words that begin with a consonant sound, while “an” is used before words that begin with a vowel sound.

*Examples:*

1. *A cookie can be delicious for a midnight snack.* (“Cookie” does not refer to a specific cookie; **instead, the writer uses a to make a generalization.**)
2. *I have an orange in my lunchbox.* (“Orange here” refers to a **single orange that is not specifically identified.**)

The definite article (*the*) is used to modify singular, plural, or collective nouns (also called **generic or group nouns**). *“The” is used to identify a specific object or objects.*

*Examples:*

1. *The cookies I ate at the party were delicious.* (Cookies refers to specific things that were eaten at a specific event and so both nouns take “the.”)
2. *However, I preferred the apples to the cookies.* (The writer is identifying specific groups of apples and cookies, so each noun takes “the.”)

Articles are not used to modify **collective nouns**. Articles are not used with **plural nouns or with noncount nouns when making a generalization.**

*Omitting* the article **signals that the noun is part of a generalized statement about a group, category, or class of objects.**

*Examples:*

1. *Fruit is more nutritious than cookies.* (“Fruit” is a collective noun, and “cookies” is a plural noun; both nouns refer to **groups or categories of objects in general**; therefore, no article is used.)
2. *Apples are usually available at every grocery store.* (“Apples” is a plural noun referring to **a category of objects**, so no article is used).
3. *Junk mail is exciting!* (**Mail is a noncount noun**, so no article is used.)

**II. Some reasons why these rules can be confusing:**

*Proper nouns usually don’t take articles. There are two common exceptions:*

## LUC WRITING CENTER - MORE ABOUT ARTICLE USAGE

1. **Proper nouns use the definite article (the) if they contain a prepositional phrase** (ex. the United States of America; the University of California; the Museum of Natural History).
2. **Some place names and geographical terms use the definite article (the), while others do not.** Use the with rivers, oceans, bridges, regions, or buildings, and with plural lakes, mountains, and islands (ex. the Colorado River, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Sears Tower, the Great Lakes, the Galapagos Islands).

### How to Notice and Correct Any Errors:

- I. *Determine the nature and meaning of the noun.*

Is the noun referring to **an unspecified singular object or a particular object?**

Is the noun part of **a generalized statement about a group or class of objects?**

Is the noun **a proper noun?**

- II. *Then, based on the rules above, determine whether the noun requires an indefinite or definite article, or no article at all.*

### Practice:

**Complete the following sentences with “a,” “an,” “the,” or nothing at all.**

1. On our farm, we raise \_\_\_\_ horses, \_\_\_\_ sheep, \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ goats.
2. In \_\_\_\_ recent news article, I read about \_\_\_\_ financial impact of \_\_\_\_ 2008 volcanic eruption in \_\_\_\_ Iceland.
3. \_\_\_\_ migration of \_\_\_\_ monarch butterflies is \_\_\_\_ epic journey across several continents.
4. Although \_\_\_\_ researchers from \_\_\_\_ University of Chicago carefully presented \_\_\_\_ methods and \_\_\_\_ results of their study, their original hypothesis is based on \_\_\_\_ flawed premises.
5. \_\_\_\_ amount of \_\_\_\_ ice on \_\_\_\_ melting glaciers is popularly regarded as \_\_\_\_ symptom of \_\_\_\_ global warming.

### Further Resources:

[“Using Articles”](#) (Purdue Owl)

[“Use of Articles”](#) (Germanna Community College)

[“Articles”](#) (UNC Writing Center)

These materials were partially adapted from *Understanding and Using English Grammar*.

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