



The Catholic University of America **Writing Center Handout**

Articles

The proper use of articles comes naturally to most native English speakers. But for some non-native speakers, learning when to use “a,” “an” and “the” can be time consuming, and the rules themselves can seem arbitrary. This handout is an effort to simplify those rules and make them readily accessible.

Indefinite Articles

“A” and “an” are the indefinite articles of English. They refer to general objects and precede nouns that have not been mentioned before or that do not identify a specific member of a class. They always refer to singular nouns.

“A” is used when the word it precedes begins with a consonant. (A dog; a pot of spaghetti; a great idea.) “An” is used when the word it precedes begins with a vowel. (An apple; an early riser; an easy question.):

- “I saw a yellow car on the way home.” (The yellow car has not been referred to before.)
- “I want a monkey for my birthday.” (Any monkey will do. The speaker has not identified a specific member of the class.)
- “An idea popped into my head.” (The speaker has not yet identified the idea.)

The Definite Article

“The” is the definite article. It does one of three things:

- It identifies a specific object
- It refers to an object about which the reader already knows something
- It refers to the only object in its class.

“The” can be used with singular or plural nouns. Here are some examples:

- “I saw a yellow car on the way home. The car was driving at least eighty miles per hour.” (The car has been previously identified.)
- “The Theory of Relativity is too complicated for eighth-graders.” (Refers to the only object in its class – there is only one Theory of Relativity.)
- “Did you drop the kids off at school?” (The listener knows which kids are meant.)

Comparing indefinite and the definite articles:

- "I found a dollar on the sidewalk." The indefinite article here refers to a generic dollar; the speaker is introducing a new subject.
- "I found the dollar on the sidewalk." The definite article here refers to a dollar that has already been identified; perhaps the speaker had lost a dollar and was looking for it.

No Article

Do not use any article before nouns:

- With other noun markers
- With indefinite plural nouns
- With indefinite non-count nouns

Other noun markers: Besides articles, there are other words that can indicate a noun is about to follow. Those words are called noun markers, and they include numbers, possessive pronouns, and quantifiers. When one of them is used, an article is usually omitted:

- "That dog is too noisy."
- "He takes **five** classes." (A number substitutes for the article.)
- "I'd like **some** cookies." (A quantifier substitutes for the article.)

Indefinite plural nouns: One can also omit the article for plural nouns that are general or indefinite:

- "I am afraid of **spiders**."
- "That's one small step for **man**, but a giant leap for **mankind**."

Indefinite non-count nouns: Non-count nouns, logically enough, are nouns that cannot be counted. They include words like "sugar," "freedom," "paperwork" and "sunshine." Non-count nouns are not preceded by an article when they are general or indefinite – in short, when they would normally take "a" or "an":

- "I love **milk**."
- "**Music** is the universal language."
- "We are required to do **research** for next week's assignment."