A/An: The Indefinite Article

Use “a” or “an” to refer to:

1. Singular count nouns*. (Count nouns are any nouns that can be counted.) Don’t use “a” or “an” when referring to noncount nouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular Count Nouns</th>
<th>Noncount Nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A source of water is critical to survival.</td>
<td>Access to water is critical to survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I read a book about healthy relationships.</td>
<td>Respect is critical to healthy relationships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. When it doesn’t matter which one

Can I borrow a pen? (Any pen is fine.)

3. When you are referring to one member of a particular class or group

A student at Brown must develop excellent writing skills.
An artist develops sharp observation skills.

Usage Note: Deciding whether to use “a” or “an” is all about pronunciation. Choose “a” before a consonant sound and “an” before a vowel sound. Remember this decision is made by sound not spelling, so:

- a house but an hour
- a university but an uncle
- a book but an interesting book (Folse 59)

The: The Definite Article

Use “the” to refer to:

1. Something specific

Please hand me the book on the table. (Not any book; the one that is on the table!)
The Brown Daily Herald is an excellent newspaper. (Not any newspaper; specifically the BDH.)

2. The second reference and all subsequent references

Reference Guides are available for English Language Learners. The guides can be found in the Writing Center.

3. The only example of something around

The photograph is lovely. (There is only one on the wall!)
Have you seen the markers? (Presumably, there is only one set of markers.)

4. The parts of something (but not generally the parts of the body)

Use the hands on the clock to tell the time. (The hands are a part of the clock.)
I like my new computer but I wish the monitor was bigger. (The monitor is part of the computer.)

5. Superlative Adjectives

Reading frequently is the best way to build your vocabulary.
The Empire State building was once the tallest building in New York.

6. To mean the famous example of someone/thing

Have you met Dan Brown, the writer?
**Articles continued**

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### When No Article is Necessary

Don’t use any article when referring to:

1. A category or group in general/General meaning not specific examples

   - I really like **ice cream**. (*in general*)
   - I really like **the ice cream** at Ben & Jerry’s. (*specific*)

2. Before abstract nouns (*like feelings and ideas*)

   - All people need **love** in their lives. (*not the love*)

3. With proper names

   - Please call **Susan** before you leave. (*not the Susan*)

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*According to Swan (55), singular count nouns must always have either an article or some other determiner. Determiners are words like:

- Demonstratives: This, that, these, those
- Possessives: My, your, his, her, its, our, their
- Numbers: one, fourteen, ninety seven
- Quantifiers: Each, many, several, all, etc.*

**Key Terms:**

**Count Nouns:** Nouns that you can count. Count Nouns have a singular and plural form.

**Noncount Nouns (Uncountable Nouns):** Nouns that can’t be counted. They often refer to collectives, liquids, sports, nature, and ideas. You can’t use the indefinite article (a/an) with noncount nouns. So: “A rice would be delicious,” “A tennis is a fun sport,” are not plausible sentences in English.

**Sources**


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*Need more help: Email Rachel Toncelli, ELL Director, at elliwriting@brown.edu for a schedule of English Language Seminars.*