

Articles: A Summary

What is an article?

An article is a word placed before a noun which shows whether we are talking about something **specific or general**.

How many articles are there in English?

English has three articles: **a**, **an**, **the**. We have two indefinite articles (**a** and **an**) and one definite article (**the**). In some instances we use **no article**.

How do we use articles in English?

Here is a quick comparison:

Article	Main idea	Example
a	One, non-specific	<i>I saw a bird.</i>
an	One, non-specific + before a vowel sound	<i>She ate an apple.</i>
the	Specific/known	<i>I fed the bird.</i>
no article	General idea; most proper nouns	<i>Birds can fly. John's birthday is in April.</i>

1) Indefinite articles: a/an

We use **a/an** when talking about **one thing or person in a general or non-specific way**.

- a** is used before a **consonant sound**: *a book, a university, a car*
- an** is used before a **vowel sound**: *an apple, an hour, an interesting story*

! We do not use **an** in front of words like **university** or **union** because, although they start with the vowel letter U, they do not start with a vowel sound. They both start with a /j/ sound, which is a consonant sound.

Main uses:

- to mention something for the first time: *I saw **a dog** in the park.*
- to mean "one": *He has **a sister**.*
- to describe someone's profession or identity: *She is **an engineer**.*

2) Definite article: the

We use **the** for **specific people or things**. The listener or reader knows who or what thing(s) we mean. We can use **the** for both singular and plural nouns.

Main uses:

- something already mentioned: *I saw **a dog** in the park. **The dog** was very cute.*
- something specific: *Please close **the door**.*
- something unique: *the sun, the moon, the Earth*
- superlatives and ordinal numbers: *the best students, the first chapter*
- certain geographical names: *the Pacific Ocean, the United States, the Alps*

3) No article (zero article)

Sometimes we **do not use an article**. We can call this the zero article.

Main uses:

- plural nouns when speaking generally: ***Dogs** are friendly.*
- uncountable nouns when speaking generally: ***Water** is essential.*
- most proper nouns: ***Australia** is a large country. **Frank** is funny.*
- languages and school subjects: *I speak **English**. I study **history**.*
- meals in general: *We had **breakfast** at 8.*