

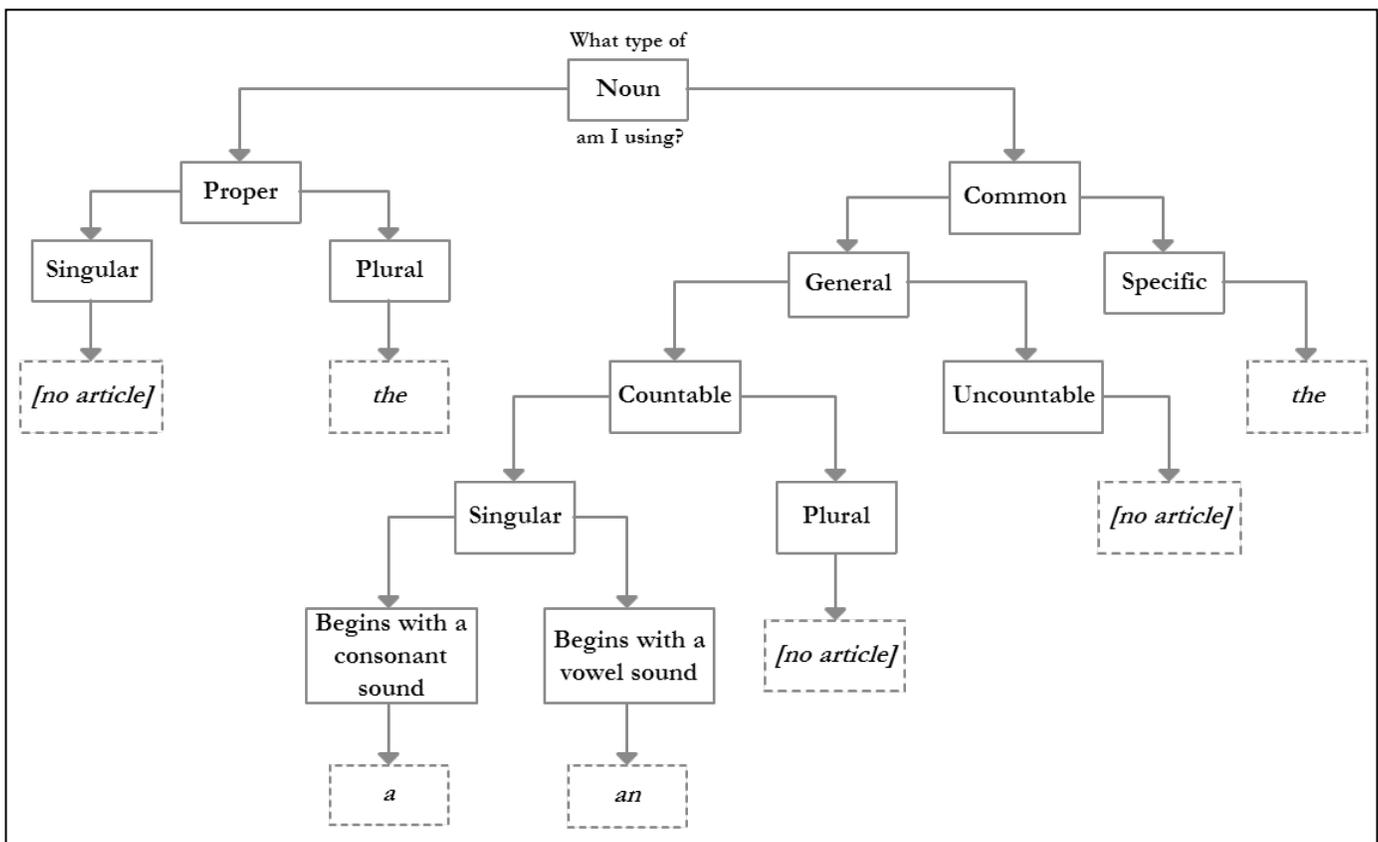
Article Usage



Articles are determiners or noun markers, meaning they let a reader know what kind of noun is being used. Articles are separated into indefinite (*a, an*) and definite (*the*) articles. Knowing when to use articles and knowing which one to use can be difficult and requires an understanding of different classifications of nouns. This handout will provide helpful guidelines for article usage; however, as with any grammar and usage rule, exceptions exist.

Choosing the Correct Article

The following chart will help you determine which article to use.



Proper vs. Common Nouns

The specific name of a person, place, or thing is referred to as a proper noun. Plural proper nouns usually need a definite article. Singular proper nouns also need definite articles if you are referring to a historical event or period (**the American Revolution**); a building, hotel, museum, or highway (**the Harold B. Lee Library**); or a desert, forest, peninsula, body of water, or point on a globe (**the Pacific Ocean**).

Example: Daniel likes to hike, but can't because **the Rocky Mountains** are still very snowy.

Common nouns do not have specific names, but refer to general groups or classes of things.

Example: **The teacher** gave too much homework.

The following sections will help you know which article (if any) to use with common nouns.

General vs. Specific Nouns

General nouns include nouns that have not been previously introduced. Use indefinite articles for nouns being introduced for the first time and definite articles when nouns have already been introduced.

Example: I saw a dog. The dog was sleeping under a tree. The tree was big.

Specific nouns are also common nouns that have been singled out and have a specific role. They use a definite article.

Example: I ate the pizza that was in the fridge.

General nouns, however, are common nouns that have not been singled out and have no specific role. General nouns need either indefinite articles or no articles at all.

Example: I like pizza. I ate a pizza yesterday.

In this example, definite articles are **not** used because it is not clear which pizza you like or which pizza you ate. The following sections outline which article (if any) you should use with general nouns.

Countable vs. Uncountable

If the general noun cannot be counted, or numbered, then it is uncountable and needs no article.

Example: I am covered in dirt.

Keep in mind that an uncountable noun can be turned into a specific noun and would then require a definite article.

Example: The dirt on me won't come off.

If the general noun *can* be counted, or numbered, then it is countable and may need an article.

Example: I need a shower. Showers make me feel better.

When the countable noun is plural, like *showers*, then it does not need an article. Singular countable nouns need indefinite articles.

Often uncountable nouns can fit into one of several categories like liquids and gases (water, coffee, milk, air, oxygen), grains and materials (wood, metal, cheese, sand, rice), energy and forces (electricity, sunshine, heat), subjects (French, chemistry, science, math), grouped concepts (fruit, money, food, news), and information or abstract concepts (information, advice, education, intelligence, democracy).

Consonant Sound vs. Vowel Sound at the Beginning of a Noun

Singular countable nouns use indefinite articles. If the noun begins with a consonant sound, use **a**. If it begins with a vowel sound, use **an**.

Example: My sister wants an apple, not a banana. I'll give it to her in an hour.

When adjectives are used to describe these countable nouns, you will need to choose an indefinite article based on the first sound of the adjective, not the noun. Like nouns, if the adjective begins with a consonant sound, use **a**. If it begins with a vowel sound, use **an**.

Example: My sister wants a green apple now. She doesn't want to wait a whole hour.