

# A Tip Sheet for Using The English Articles

## *What they are and how to use them*

Articles in English indicate whether something is specific or general (grammatically, that's called definite or indefinite). **The** means one particular thing and **a/an** means one example in a category of things. For example:

*What are **the** articles?* vs. *What is **an** article?*

The answer to the first question is: "The specific articles are **the** and **a/an**." The answer to the second question is "An article is *category* of adjective that tells you whether a noun means one particular thing, or just an example of a type of thing." Let's look at another example:

*Go find **the** cat!* vs. *Go find **a** cat!*

The first case here means that there is *one particular* cat that I want you to find. Maybe my adorable Fluffy has run off, and I expect you to get her back for me. The second case, though, means *any* cat will do. I am not looking for Fluffy, or Mittens, or any other *specific* cat, just any cat that you happen to find.

So, you should use **the** when you mean a specific thing, and **a/an** when you mean a kind of thing. In the case of **plurals** (*cats, dogs, bats, mistakes*), though, you should not use an article unless you mean a specific group of things, in which case you use **the** (*the cats, the dogs, the bats*, etc). So for plurals, you never use **a/an** but you can sometimes use **the**.

## *When to use "a" and when to use "an"*

But when should you use **a** and when should you use **an**? The answer depends on what the word sounds like—use **a** if it starts with a consonant sound and **an** if it starts with a vowel sound.

*A cat, a bat, a kangaroo, a coffee cup, a research paper, and a professor walk into a yurt.  
An ibex, an impatient student, and an iPod are shipwrecked on an island for an hour.*

Note that you still use **an** before *hour*, even though it starts with an *h*, because when you say it out loud, it starts with a vowel sound. This also works with adjectives: the phrase *impatient student* gets **an**, and the phrase *research paper* gets **a**, both because of the sounds at the start of the adjectives. Also note that you use **a** before *yurt* in the first sentence, because even though *y* is sometimes a vowel, the *y* sound counts as a consonant for articles.

## *Exceptions to the rules*

"BUT," you may be saying, "this is too complicated. Do I really need to use articles?" Yes, English grammar requires that you use them almost all the time. Except, of course, for some exceptions. The following are a few of the common ones:

- **Don't** use articles with **proper nouns** (*Antioch U., Margaret, Mount Monadnock, Church St.*)
- **Don't** use articles with **nouns that already have a possessive** (*my cat, your elephant, her research*)
- **Don't** use articles with **names of games, meals, or academic study areas** (*soccer, baseball, scrabble, breakfast, lunch, math, environmental studies, applied psychology.*)
- **Do** use articles with **rivers, oceans, deserts, and many geographic locations**, even though they are proper nouns (*the Atlantic Ocean, the Sahara Desert, the White Mountain National Forest*).

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