



UNIVERSITY OF
**DETROIT
MERCY**

Articles

<https://writingcenter.udmercy.edu/> (for resources)
<http://udm.mywconline.com/> (for appointments)



The Writing Center
DETROIT MERCY

What is an article?

An article modifies a noun; its presence indicates a noun will follow.

There are two indefinite articles (a & an) and one definite article (the).

Answering the following questions will help you determine if you should use an article.

Proper or Common Noun?

A **proper noun** is the specific name of a person, place, or thing (*John, Tokyo, UVU*).

- ⇒ Use the article *the* before **plural proper nouns** (*the Smiths, the Rocky Mountains*).
- ⇒ Use no article before **singular proper nouns** (*John Smith, Mount Rushmore*).

A **common noun** is not a name, but a general group (*person, city, university*). To decide if a common noun needs an article, you must decide if the noun is specific or general. (See the next section).

Exceptions: Use *the* with the **proper noun** (name) of a historical event, historical period, highway, building, hotel, museum, river, ocean, sea, point on a globe, desert, forest, gulf, or peninsula (*the Equator, the East*). Only use *the* with the name of a country if the name is plural, as in *the Netherlands*, or if it is a phrase, such as *the Dominican Republic*.

Specific or General Noun?

Specific nouns refer to a specific member or to several specific members of a general category. Normally, they require the definite article, *the*.

- ⇒ EXAMPLE: The dogs in that park are ugly. *Here, the word dogs refers to specific, individual animals.*

General nouns refer to a general class of something, rather than to a specific member of a class.

- ⇒ EXAMPLE: Dogs are man's best friends. *The word Dogs refers to a class of animals, not to any specific animals.*

To decide if a general noun needs an article, determine whether it is countable. (See the next section.)

Often when a specific noun is mentioned for the first time, it is treated like a general noun.

However, any time the noun is mentioned thereafter, the definite article *the* is used.

- ⇒ EXAMPLE: *Yesterday, I bought a book, but it was not until today that I was able to read the book.*

Uncountable or Countable Noun?

Uncountable nouns cannot be numbered (jewelry, happiness, and dirt). Generally, you should not precede uncountable nouns with articles.

Countable nouns refer to something that can be counted (baby, thought, and problem). To determine if a countable noun needs an article, decide if it is plural or singular (see the next section).

Exceptions: Sometimes, an uncountable noun can be turned into a specific noun. In such cases, use the definite article *the*. This situation normally occurs if the uncountable noun is modified by a phrase or clause that makes it more specific and limited, or if the uncountable noun refers to a specific portion, amount, or collection of the uncountable noun.

- ⇒ EXAMPLE: John ate dirt. *The word dirt does not refer to any specific pile of dirt.*
- ⇒ EXAMPLE: John scooped up some dirt with his shovel. Then, to my dismay, he ate the dirt. *The second instance of the word dirt is preceded by the because the writer is referring to a specific pile of dirt.*

Plural or Singular Noun?

If the noun is plural and general, no article is needed. If the noun is singular, a or an is needed.

Exception: A countable, singular noun sometimes uses *the* when it refers to a general group.

- ⇒ Example: The cat is a great pet. *The cat refers to the general group of all cats.*

Which Indefinite Article (A or An)?

Use an before words that begin with vowel sounds. Use a before words that begin with consonant sounds. Note: The article is determined by the word directly after the article, even if the word is an adjective, rather than the noun

- ⇒ Example: An ugly dog versus a dog.

Some Specific Cases

The article *the* is always used before the word *same* and ordinal numbers (*the same time*, *the first child*).

When Not to Use an Article

- ⇒ There are several cases in which you should not precede a noun with an article:
- ⇒ Before the names of languages, sports, and fields of study (Spanish, soccer, sociology)
- ⇒ When the noun is modified by a **demonstrative pronoun** (*this, that, those, these*, etc.)
- ⇒ When the noun is modified by a **possessive pronoun** (*my, his, her, its, their, your*, etc.)
- ⇒ When the noun is modified by various other **quantity words** that indicate a noun will follow (*all, another, each, every, many, much, some, seven*, etc.)