

Articles at Glance

- There are only three articles in the English language: the, a, an.
- Articles are always attached to nouns.
- **For ESL students:** articles are NOT gender specific.

Explanation of Definite and Indefinite Articles

The Definite Article:

The is called the definite article. It is used with a noun that we identify by a phrase after it or with a noun that we have spoken of earlier in the paragraph. It can be used with both plural and singular nouns. It is not used with nouns that are general.

Compare these examples:

- Coffee comes from South America (*coffee in general*).
- **The** coffee from Colombia is very good (*a particular coffee*).
- Vegetables are good for our health (*vegetables in general*).
- Peas and carrots are **the** vegetables I prefer (*particular vegetables*).

There are some cases when you should NOT use "the":

1. With names preceded by a title:
 - I talked to Professor Miller yesterday.
 - Jerry saw Mr. Chen this morning.
2. With continents, countries, lakes, states, cities, and streets:
 - Nigeria is in Africa.
 - We sailed on Lake Superior.
 - We used to live on Laurel Street.
3. With names of a language, unless you use the word "language":
 - Jose understands English.
 - Maria speaks **the** English language.
4. Before "next" or "last" in phrases related to the present time:
 - College classes begin next week.
 - I saw him last Saturday.

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5. With "breakfast," "lunch," or "dinner"

- Used without modifiers:

- I had cereal for breakfast.

NOTE: The dinner at the party was very good. (*Here "dinner" has an identifying phrase after it.*)

6. With "home" used without a modifier:

- Ben is at home.

- Sarah is going home.

- **NOTE:** Cindy is visiting **the** home of some friends. (*Here "home" has an identifying phrase after it.*)

The Indefinite Articles:

A and **an** are called the indefinite articles and are used with nouns that are singular but can be counted. **An** precedes nouns beginning with a vowel sound ("**An** Online Writing Lab just flew by"); **a** comes before nouns beginning with a consonant sound ("**A** robin just flew by"). Both **a** and **an** mean that you are not specifying a particular thing.

Compare these examples:

- There's **a** book on the table. (*This means you do not know what book it is.*)
- I want **the** book on the table. (*This means that you want that particular book, not the one on the desk or the floor.*)