

A, An, and The

The use of articles in English—*a*, *an*, and *the*—can be difficult to learn, especially if your first language doesn't use articles. The following rules and examples are adapted from *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: A Practical Handbook* by Keith S. Folze and Betty Azar (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

No Article	
Rule	Example
When you want to talk about a category or group in general, use no article.	<i>general</i> : Cats can be great pets <i>specific</i> : The cats in that pet store are expensive.
Use no article before abstract nouns such as feelings or ideas (usually nouns you can't count).	<i>wrong</i> : A person's future success depends on the education <i>correct</i> : A person's future success depends on education <i>wrong</i> : The patience is a virtue. <i>correct</i> : Patience is a virtue.

Indefinite Articles: <i>a</i>, <i>an</i>	
Rule	Example
Use <i>a</i> or <i>an</i> before a singular noun that you can count.	I'm reading a book. <i>wrong</i> : I'm walking on a sand.
Use <i>a</i> or <i>an</i> before a singular noun that is not specific and is being mentioned for the first time.	Speaker A: We went to an ice cream shop, and later we watched a movie. Speaker B: Which ice cream shop? Speaker A: The one on Columbia Road.

Definite Article: <i>the</i>	
Rule	Example
Use <i>the</i> when you are talking about something specific.	<i>general:</i> I wish I had an umbrella right now! <i>specific:</i> The umbrella next to the door is not mine.
Use <i>the</i> when the speaker and the listener are talking about the same specific item.	<i>general:</i> Every kitchen has a refrigerator. <i>specific:</i> William, don't forget to close the refrigerator!
Use <i>the</i> for the second and all other references to the same noun.	<i>first reference:</i> James and I bought a new computer last month. <i>second reference:</i> The computer lets us access the Internet really quickly.
Use <i>the</i> with the superlative form of an adjective, which means with the word <i>most</i> or with the ending <i>-est</i> .	<i>comparative:</i> In a jewelry store, gold is more expensive than silver. <i>superlative:</i> In a jewelry store, diamonds are the most expensive item.
Use <i>the</i> for the names of countries that look plural, including countries that end in <i>-s</i> or have the words <i>united</i> , <i>union</i> , <i>republic</i> , or <i>kingdom</i> .	The Philippines, the Netherlands, the United States, the Soviet Union, the Dominican Republic, the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Use <i>the</i> for the parts of something. (Exception: In general, we do not use <i>the</i> for body parts).	<i>General:</i> In a kitchen, there is a stove, a refrigerator, and a sink. <i>Parts:</i> I went to Mary's new house last night. Her kitchen is beautiful. The refrigerator is silver, the stove is black, and the sink is huge.
Use <i>the</i> with most bodies of water except individual lakes.	the Mississippi River the Pacific Ocean the Mediterranean Sea the Great Lakes (but Lake Michigan)
Use <i>the</i> with geographic parts of the globe and geographic areas, deserts, and peninsulas.	the equator the Middle East the Gobi Desert the South