

The Writing Centre

A, AN, THE: A Guide to Using Articles

“A”, “An” and “The” are articles. They come before a noun, and any modifiers that refer to that noun.

In general, nouns that can be counted, or quantified, require articles, while those that cannot be counted do not. For example:

- Rain is common in Nova Scotia.
- **The** rain kept me indoors on Sunday.

THE:

With singular countable nouns, “the” is used in the following cases:

- When the noun names something unique or generally known. For example:
The earth revolves around **the** sun.
- When the noun names something used to represent something, or that is abstract. For example: **The** beaver is the Canadian national animal.
- When the noun names something that was referred to earlier in the sentence or elsewhere in the text. For example: **The** window in my office is leaking. *Or* I had pizza for supper last night. **The** pizza was from Salvatore’s restaurant.
- When the noun names something that can be figured out because of the context. For example: [I had pizza for supper last night. The pizza was from Salvatore’s restaurant.] I had **the** leftover pizza for lunch today.

“**The**” is used with plural countable nouns when they have specific meanings. For example: Tom has three dogs. **The** dogs need to be walked twice everyday.

With **proper nouns**, use “**the**” when:

- They are written “the...of...” For example: **the** United States of America, **the** Prime Minister of Canada.
- They are plural. For example: **the** Smiths, **the** Boston Red Sox.
- When they name a group. For example: **the** International Labour Organization, **the** United Nations.
- With some geographical features. For example: **the** Nile, **the** Pacific Ocean.

“**A**” and “**AN**”: Are used with non-specific, singular countable nouns. For example: I’m reading **a** book about Latin America.

“**AN**”: Is used before words that begin with a vowel sound. That is *a, e, i, o* or *u*. *H* and *u* can have both vowel and consonant sounds. For example: The woman was wearing **an** ugly dress. *Or* The book you gave me was **a** useful source for my paper.