

The Use and Non-Use of Articles

Brought to you by the Purdue University On-Line Writing Lab.

The articles A, AN, and THE are signals for four distinctions: 1. countable vs. noncountable 2. definite vs. indefinite 3. first vs. subsequent mention 4. general vs. specific

1. Countable vs. Noncountable

A and AN are used in sentences where the noun can be counted.

Example: "I ran into A POST."

(How many posts did you run into? Just one. Therefore, use A.)

"I ran into THE WATER."

(How many waters did you run into? The question doesn't make any sense. Therefore, use THE.)

2. Definite vs. Indefinite

A and AN signal that the noun that it modifies in your sentence is indefinite, that it refers to any member of a group.

THE signals that the noun that it modifies in your sentence is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group.

Example: A dog (any dog)

THE dog (that specific dog)

A book (just any book)

THE book (the book that you are reading right now, for example)

Note: THE is also used when what its noun refers to is unique: THE White House, THE theory of relativity, THE 1986 federal budget

3. First vs. Subsequent Mention

A or AN is used to introduce a noun when it is mentioned for the first time in a piece of writing. THE is used afterward each time you mention that same noun.

Example

AN awards ceremony at the Kremlin would not normally have attracted such so much attention. But when it was leaked that Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko would be presenting medals to three cosmonauts, interest in THE ceremony intensified. Time, Sept. 17, 1984

Note: THERE IS and THERE ARE can be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or essay.

4. General vs. Specific

A, AN, and THE can all be used to indicate that the noun is referring to the whole class to which a countable noun belongs. This use of the article is called "generic," from the Latin word meaning "class."

Example

A tiger is a dangerous animal. (every tiger)
THE tiger is a dangerous animal. (all tigers)

The difference between the indefinite A and AN and the generic A and AN is that the former means any one member of a class while the latter means all of the members of a class.

Note: The omission of the article also expresses a generic (or general) meaning:

a) with a plural noun

Tigers are dangerous animals. (all tigers)

b) with a noncountable noun

Anger is a destructive emotion. (all angers or any kind of anger)

Omission of Articles

While some nouns combine with one article or the other because they

are countable or noncountable, other kinds simply never take either article. Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- a) names of languages: Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian
- b) names of sports: volleyball, hockey, soccer
- c) names of academic subjects: mathematics, biology, history, drafting

Since these uses are irregular, one of the best ways for a native speaker to pick them out is to see what "sounds right."