

ELL/ESL: ARTICLES

Articles modify nouns and indicate limits for the nouns they accompany. The word “*the*” functions as a **definite article**, which indicates specific nouns. The words “*a*” and “*an*” function as **indefinite articles**, which indicate general nouns. **Zero articles** occur when specific nouns *do not require an article*.

A common writing error involves leaving out articles--particularly after “to-be” verbs.

HOW TO USE ARTICLES

1. **Place “a” and “an” before general, singular count nouns.** – Ask yourself, “Does this noun refer to something specific or general? Can I count out how many of the thing there are?” (ex: a book, an astronaut)

- **Example of general, singular count nouns.**
 - **Incorrect:** He picked up cup.
 - **Correct:** He picked up *a* cup.
- **Example categories of count nouns: people, places, or things.**

People:

- Incorrect:** He has cousin in California.
- Correct:** He has *a* cousin in California.

Places:

- Incorrect:** Chicago is major city in Illinois.
- Correct:** Chicago is *a* major city in Illinois.

Things:

- Incorrect:** She must read 300 page book for her class!
- Correct:** She must read *a* 300 page book for her class!

2. **Match general, singular count nouns with “a” or “an” based on their starting sounds** - Sound out the noun, and ask yourself, “Does it start with a hard sound (consonant) or a soft sound (vowel)?”
 - Use “**a**” for nouns beginning with a consonant sound and “**an**” for nouns beginning with a vowel sound. (ex: a car, an elevator)
3. **Place “the” before specific nouns** – Look for nouns that **you have already used** (ex. a girl...the girl), nouns that act as **pieces of a whole** (ex. the mantle), countries with **names that sound plural** (ex. the Philippines), and nouns that depict **geographic features** (ex. the Rocky Mountains).

Explanation of nouns “**you have already used**”:

- For the example given (a girl...the girl) you use the article “a” to refer to the girl when you are first talking about her, as there is nothing to distinguish her from any other girl. When you talk about her a second time, you use the article “the” to point out that it is the same girl as before. She has gone from being a *general* noun to a *specific* noun.

- Example: “A girl in my class gave a great speech, and *the* girl also became class president after her speech.”

NOTE: The first time I reference “girl,” I am pointing out that a female in my class did a good job, and the second time I reference her, I am pointing out that this **same girl** accomplished another good thing.

4. **Place “the” before superlative adjectives** – Superlative adjectives commonly end with the letters **“st” or “est”** (ex: the most accurate research, the greatest show). Superlative adjectives, by their very nature, always make the noun they modify specific.

Do not place articles before broad categories, feelings, or ideas – Because you cannot count a feeling or add specificity to an idea, **these words do not require an article** (ex: firefighters, joy, ethics). You would leave out an article for nouns that do the following things:

- **Has no physical existence but is abstract in nature** (ex. They all have so much joy.)
 - This occurs for an unknown amount of time. The subjects of this example have joy, but the reader cannot determine how much joy that the subjects have nor can they determine how long this joy will last.
- **Have an indefinite number within a particular group** (ex. There were **many** firefighters trying to stop the house from becoming engulfed with flames).
 - This demonstrates who the writer is talking about but not the number of firefighters involved, making an article unnecessary.
- **Serve as general expressions of travel** (ex. I went to England by boat).
 - This does not need an article because I have not told you what particular boat I am traveling on, only that I have been to England using a mode of travel.

COMMON ARTICLE ERRORS

1. **Find singular count nouns and check for articles** – If you find a singular count noun without an article, place an article before it. Use the previous rules to determine whether to use “a,” “an,” or “the.”

2. **Find plural count nouns and determine whether the nouns describe categories** - If the nouns describe categories, find and remove any articles that precede them.
3. **Look for uses of the article “a” and check the starting sound of the word that “a” modifies** – If the word begins with a vowel sound, change the article “a” to the article “an.” If the word begins with a consonant sound, keep the article “a.”
4. **Locate any abstract concepts, feelings, or ideas and check for articles** - These kinds of words activate the null article principle. Remove any articles that precede these words.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- Find **singular count nouns** and check for *articles* (See rule 6):

After crafting **thesis statement** for **major project**, Kathryn enjoys **cup of tea**.

- You can count the words “thesis statement,” “major project,” and “cup of tea.” Thus, these words act as singular count nouns. These nouns do not have articles preceding them, so you must insert these articles.
- “Thesis statement” acts as a part of a whole and requires the article *“the.”*
- “Major project” and “cup of tea” act as general count nouns and begin with a consonant sound, requiring the article *“a.”*

Incorrect: After crafting thesis statement for major project, Kathryn enjoys cup of tea.

Correct: After crafting *the* thesis statement for *a* major project, Kathryn enjoys *a* cup of tea.

- Find **plural count nouns** and determine whether the nouns describe categories:

All the **lawyers** must pass the bar exam.

- You can count out multiple “lawyers,” making it a plural count noun. The word “all” infers a category or general group.

- **If the nouns describe categories, find and remove any *articles* that precede them** (See rule 7):

All *the* lawyers must pass the bar exam.

- Remove the definite article “the.”

Incorrect: All the lawyers must pass the bar exam.

Correct: All lawyers must pass the bar exam.

- **Look for uses of the article “a” and check the starting sound of the word that “a” modifies** (See rule 8):

A hour from now, please send me **a** honest critique.

- Although “h” is a consonant, the “h” in “hour” and “honest” is silent, thus the words begin with a vowel sound. Because of the vowel sound, you should change “a” to “an.”

Incorrect: A hour from now, please send me a honest critique.

Correct: **An** hour from now, please send me **an** honest critique.

- Locate any **abstract concepts, feelings, or ideas** and check for **articles** (See rule 9):

The agenda-setting theory posits that the news influences what the public thinks about.

- Because “agenda-setting theory” is an abstract concept, remove the article before it.

Incorrect: The agenda-setting theory posits that the news influences what the public thinks about.

Correct: Agenda-setting theory posits that the news influences what the public thinks about.

This information comes from the chapter “Key 7: Articles” in *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: A Practical Handbook*, by Keith S. Folse.

PRACTICE NOW