

ARTICLES

The three articles in English are *a*, *an*, and *the*. They signal that a noun will follow (maybe after some other modifiers). *A* is used with a nonspecific noun that begins with a consonant sound. *An* is used with a nonspecific noun that begins with a vowel sound. *The* is used for specific count nouns.

a history book	an idea
a computer	an umbrella
the history book	the idea
the computer	the umbrella

Knowing when to use the appropriate article (or even one at all) takes time and practice. The following definitions and rules can assist you when recognizing article usage:

Terms to Recognize

Definite – specific; having exact and discernible limits (use *the*)

Indefinite – not specific; not having exact and discernible limits (use *a* or *an*)

Helpful Rules:

Rule # 1 - Use the definite article for countable nouns that have been previously mentioned.

Example – I saw a red Lambogini yesterday [first mention, indefinite]. It was fiery red with yellow flames on the car hood. When I saw the Lambogini [second mention, definite], I was just telling my friend that Lamboginis are my favorite car.

Rule # 2 – A superlative or ranking adjective makes the noun's identity specific.

Example – Sarah is the tallest girl in this class. [there can only be 1 tallest girl in the class]

Rule # 3 – the noun describes a unique person, place, or thing.

Example - The ozone layer contains enormous amounts of reactive oxygen. [The earth has only one ozone layer]

Rule # 4 – when the modifying word, phrase, or clause follows a noun add *the* to make the noun clear/specific .

Example - Did you like the movie that we saw yesterday? [*the* before implies that there is only specific movie that was seen]

Rule # 5 – allow the context of the noun to determine if it requires a definite article

Example – “Please open the window,” said Alex. [the context implies that the speaker and the listener both know which window should be opened]

Rule #6 – for non specific nouns that ARE countable.

Example – I had an apple, a burger, and a smoothie for lunch. [each item had for lunch is countable and not specific]

Quick Test

Decide if you need *a*, *the*, or nothing in the blanks in the following sentences. Some sentences could have more than one choice.

1. ____ grass outside my window is green.
2. I have _____ grass in my hand.
3. ____ grass grows everywhere in Florida.
4. ____ students over there are working hard.
5. My mother has _____ computer.
6. With computers, it is important to have ____ good hardware; it is equally important to have ____ good software.
7. There is at least ____ gallon of saltwater in ____ bottom of my ____ boat.
8. I like to help ____ students.
9. My ____ computer is working very well today.
10. My mother’s computer runs many kinds of ____ software.

Answers

1. The grass outside my window is green.
2. I have (nothing) grass in my hand.

3. ___(nothing)___ grass grows everywhere in Florida.
4. ___The___ students over there are working hard.
5. My mother has ___a___ computer.
6. With computers, it is important to have ___(nothing)___ good hardware; it is equally important to have ___(nothing)___ good software.
7. There is at least ___a___ gallon of saltwater in ___the___ bottom of my ___(nothing)___ boat.
8. I like to help ___(nothing)___ students.
9. My ___(nothing)___ computer is working very well today.
10. My mother's computer runs many kinds of ___(nothing)___ software.

More Practice

Put *a, an, the*, or nothing in the blanks in the following sentences.

1. I have _____ pumpkins in my garden. _____ pumpkins are growing very big.
2. I have _____ water in my pool. _____ water feels good on a hot day.
3. I love _____ smell of pine trees.
4. There is _____ eerie feeling in the woods at night.
5. _____ dinosaurs would make great pets.
6. Susan has _____ books in her backpack.
7. John reads _____ books all the time.
8. Huong does not like _____ sugar in her coffee.
9. Would you please put _____ sugar in my coffee?
10. I like chocolate because it is made with _____ sugar.
11. Ming likes to buy _____ eggplant for her dinner.
12. _____ shoes are generally a necessity. I like _____ comfortable shoe on the weekends. _____ uncomfortable shoe is miserable.
13. _____ weekends are time for me to do my _____ laundry. I like to separate _____ clothes into white, colors, and delicates.
14. _____ apple is a good end to my lunch. _____ banana is good as part of my _____ breakfast. I like to eat _____ vegetables with my dinner.

15. _____ sign in _____ cafeteria gave _____ prices for _____ sandwiches and fries. _____ hours are on _____ sign by the door.

More Practice Answers

1. I have __ (nothing) __ pumpkins in my garden. __ The __ pumpkins are growing very big.
2. I have __ (nothing) __ water in my pool. __ the __ water feels good on a hot day.
3. I love __ the __ smell of pine trees.
4. There is __ an __ eerie feeling in the woods at night.
5. __ (nothing) __ dinosaurs would make great pets.
6. Susan has __ (nothing) __ books in her backpack.
7. John reads __ (nothing) __ books all the time.
8. Huong does not like __ (nothing) __ sugar in her coffee.
9. Would you please put __ (nothing) __ sugar in my coffee?
10. I like chocolate because it is made with __ (nothing) __ sugar.
11. Ming likes to buy __ an __ eggplant for her dinner.
12. __ (nothing) __ shoes are generally a necessity. I like __ a __ comfortable shoe on the weekends. __ An __ uncomfortable shoe is miserable.
13. __ The __ weekends are time for me to do my __ (nothing) __ laundry. I like to separate __ the __ clothes into white, colors, and delicates.
14. __ An __ apple is a good end to my lunch. __ A __ banana is good as part of my __ (nothing) __ breakfast. I like to eat __ (nothing) __ vegetables with my dinner.
15. __ A __ sign in __ the __ cafeteria gave __ the __ prices for __ (nothing) __ sandwiches and fries. __ The __ hours are on __ a __ sign by the door.