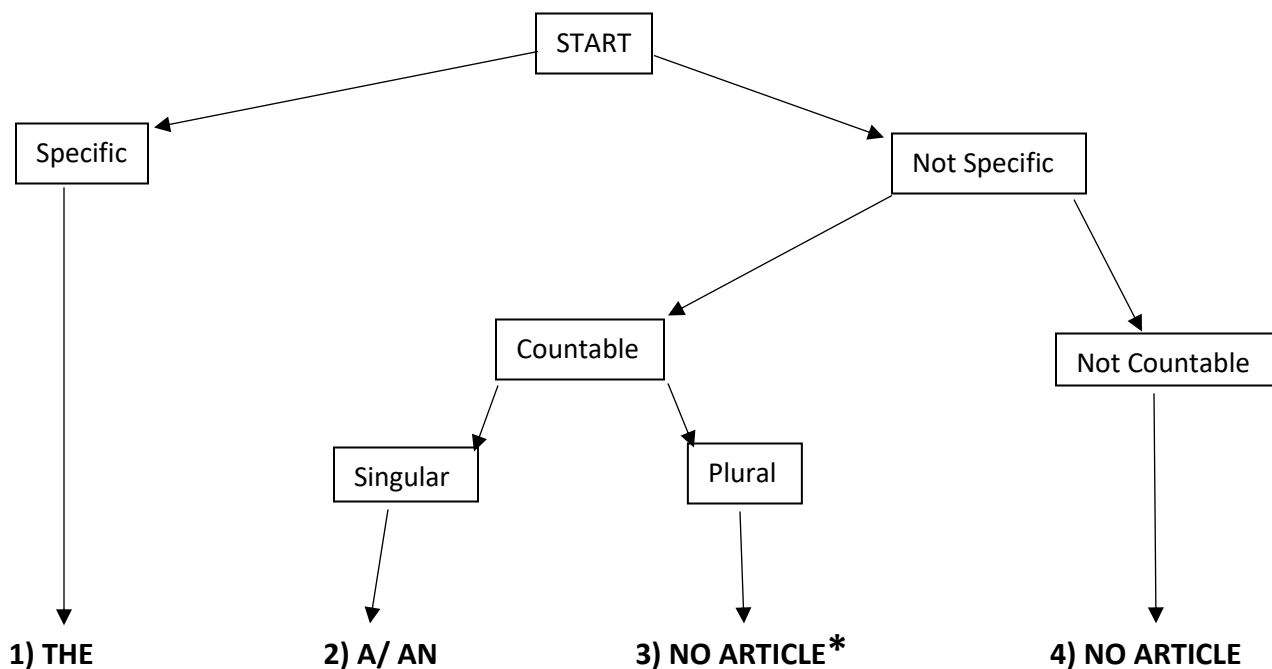


Choosing the Right Article

Articles are placed before a noun, or noun phrase. Picking the right article, *the*, *a* or *an*, can be tricky, and sometimes an article is not necessary. The following chart can help you determine which article to use or if you even need to use an article in your sentence.

A **countable noun** is anything there is more than one of, or is plural. If a countable noun is singular, it requires an **indefinite article**, *a* or *an* (*an* is placed before a vowel sound). An **uncountable noun** is anything that there is not more than one of, or, in other words, it is singular. If you are discussing anything specific it requires the **definite article**, *the* (*the* is the only definite article in English).



1) The coffee I drank this morning was too weak.

I just ate the apple you gave me yesterday.

2) I ate an apple for lunch.

I already drank a cup of coffee today.

3) Apples grow on trees.

\*There is an exception to number 3. Plural nouns take on articles when they move from being general to specific. For example: The apples on that tree are green. In this sentence the speaker, or writer, is talking about specific apples on a particular tree.

4) I drink coffee every morning.

Advice on Choosing the Right Article

**Do you and the reader share knowledge about what you are discussing?**

The first time you mention something, choose an indefinite article (*a* or *an*) because you and the reader do not share knowledge. After that, use the definite article (*the*).

For example: I saw **a** young girl walking down the street with an ice cream cone.

**The** young girl tripped and ice cream fell out of her cone.

In the first sentence, the article *a* tells the reader that you are mentioning the young girl for the first time. In the following sentence by using the definite article, *the*, you are telling your reader that you are still discussing the same young girl that you mention in your previous sentence. If you said in your first sentence “I saw **the** young girl walking down the street...”, you are implying that you and the reader both know who you are talking about.

**If there is only one of something in existence, you can assume that you and reader share the same knowledge.**

For example: **The** sun is very hot today.

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**Are you making a general statement about a person, place, or thing?**

For example: **A** dog is fun to play with.

(Any individual dog is fun to play with, generally speaking.)

Dogs are fun to play with.

(All dogs are fun to play with, generally speaking.)

If you began either of these sentences with *the*, such as “*The* dog...” or “*The* dogs...”, then you are talking about a *specific dog* or *specific dogs*, and your reader must already know about the dog or the dogs.

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**Cities, countries, states, and counties generally do not need an article.**

You would not write “I am visiting **the** New York”, but you would write “I am visiting **New York**”.

However, you would write “**the** British Virgin Islands”. Why? Remember, plural nouns take on articles when they move from being general to specific.

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**If you are describing an abstract idea or concept (love, life, education), you do not use an article.**

For example: *Life* is a beautiful experience.

*Education* is a big issue in the upcoming presidential election.

However, if you are discussing a particular love, life, or education, use an article:

**The** *life* of a goldfish is very short. **A** *college education* is valuable.