DEFINITE and INDEFINITE ARTICLES: the, a, an

The English language uses articles to identify nouns. Articles act much like adjectives. Articles clarify whether a noun is specific or general, singular or plural. An article appears before the noun it accompanies.

There are two types of articles
- Definite article: the
- Indefinite article: a, an

General rules
- Place the article before the noun.
  e.g., the house  the cat  a dog  a book

- Place the article before the adjective when the noun is modified by an adjective.
  e.g., the purple house  the black cat  a white dog  an open book < Correct
  the house purple  or  a dog white < Incorrect

- Do not add an article when the noun has a possessive pronoun (my, his, her, our, their) or a demonstrative pronoun (this, that).
  e.g., my house  her book  that house  this book < Correct
  the my house  or  the this book < Incorrect

DEFINITE ARTICLE: the

- Use the to identify specific or definite nouns: nouns that represent things, places, ideas, or persons that can be identified specifically.

- Use the with both singular and plural definite nouns.
  e.g., the house  the houses  the business  the businesses

- Use the to identify things, places, ideas, or persons that represent a specific or definite group or category.
  e.g., The students in Professor Smith’s class should study harder.
  The automobile revolutionized travel and industry.
  (the automobile identifies a specific category of transportation)
INDEFINITE ARTICLE: *a* or *an*

- Use *a* or *an* to identify nouns that are not definite and not specific.
  - Think of *a* and *an* as meaning *any* or *one among many*.
    - e.g., a book (any book) a dog (any dog) a cat (one cat) a house (one among many houses)

- Use *a* or *an* only for singular nouns.

- Do not use an article for a plural, indefinite noun.
  - Think of a plural, indefinite noun as meaning *all*.
    - e.g., Students should study hard. (All students should study hard.)

**When to use *a* and when to use *an***

- Choose when to use *a* or *an* according to the sound of the noun that follows it.
  - Use *a* before consonant sounds.
    - e.g., a book a dog
  - Use *a* before a sounded *h*, a long *u*, and *o* with the sound of *w*.
    - e.g., a hat a house a union a uniform a one-hour appointment
  - Use *an* before vowel sounds (except long *u*).
    - e.g., an asset an essay an index an onion an umbrella
  - Use *an* when *h* is not sounded.
    - e.g., an honor an hour

**NOTE:** Computerized grammar checkers do not indicate missing or misused articles. Therefore, you cannot depend on a computer grammar checker to alert you to missing or misused articles.