

Articles: A, An or The

What are Articles?

Articles are used to describe people, places, things or ideas in terms of how specific, how many, or how new to a piece the noun may be.

For example: the people a place the things an idea

Adjectives go between an article and a noun.

For example: the purple people a beautiful, peaceful place
 the three things an amazing idea

How Specific?

The:

Using this word means the noun is directly what you wish to indicate or emphasize; the noun is specific. For example:

the pizza the Nobel Peace Prize
the best example the only one

A or An:

Use these words for singular and group nouns.

Use the word 'a' when the next word begins with a consonant *most of the time:

a message a hat a flock of birds
*a unicycle *a European person *a usual place

Use the word 'an' when the next word begins with a vowel *most of the time:

an opportunity an egg an interesting situation
*an hour *an honor *an M&M

Is it Countable?

Nouns that are countable can use *a* or *an*: a hat, an egg, etc.

If you cannot count it, use *the*: energy, progress, weather, etc.

Should I always use an article?

No, it is better not to use an article at all than to use one incorrectly. A reader can get the gist of a sentence which is missing an article but may be misled by an incorrect article. Here is a passage with the articles removed:

People have been weaving silk into fabric for at least 5,000 years. ____ delicate material, made from ____ threads silkworms excrete to create their cocoons, has been used for everything from ____ robes of Byzantine emperors to ____ parachutes of World War II paratroopers. In ancient China, ____ birthplace of silk, it became luxury paper, ____ medium for paintings, and even ____ form of currency . . . To ____ outsider, silk is simply soft and pretty. To historians, silk artifacts reflect ____ trade and social customs of ____ age long gone.

(Joseph Strong, *Smithsonian*, Feb 2012)

Reading this without the articles, someone can still understand Strong's writing -- although not as precisely. Try placing different articles in the blanks to see how they affect meaning, for example:

- The third sentence is actually, "the birthplace of silk," which confirms China and nowhere else is the birthplace.
- If it read as 'a birthplace of silk,' then a reader may mistakenly think that there are other countries where silk was developed 5,000 years ago.