Articles: A, An, or The

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# **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 place, the three things, an amazing idea

# **How specific are they?**

## **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 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 sound:

* 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 sound:

* 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: the energy, the progress, the 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 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 also developed 5,000 years ago.