

USING ARTICLES

Article usage often proves difficult for non-native speakers of English, especially those whose native language does not include articles. However, there are rules that dictate when an article should be used, and which one to use. A common way of conceptualizing articles divides them into two categories: indefinite and definite.

Indefinite Articles: “a,” “an,” “some”

When a noun is generic, representing not a specific thing but a class of things, and is singular, the indefinite article “a” or “an” is used:

I have never seen a sasquatch.*
An Algonquin Bloody Mary requires vodka.*

No article is used for a plural noun of this kind:

Pickles can be either sweet or sour.*

When a noun refers to an individual item that is not specifically identified (i.e., it’s not necessary or important to single out *which* particular item or group of items), the indefinite article “a” or “an” is used:

I ate a pickle.
I ate an orange.

When a noun refers to an individual group of items that is not specifically identified, the word “some” is used (although other words, such as “many,” “several,” “a few,” and “a couple” may also be used depending on the circumstances):

I ate some pickles.
I ate some salad.

The Definite Article: “the”

When a noun refers to a specific thing or things and the listener knows which specific thing or things the speaker is referencing, the definite article “the” is used:

Thank you for the pickle.
Thank you for the pickles.

*Sometimes, however, “the” may be used with singular or plural nouns of this kind, if the noun refers to a species of animal, an invention, or a musical instrument:

The tiger is a ferocious predator.
I was only a child when the cell phone was invented.
I learned to play the tuba because it was the instrument my father played.

Exercises

Directions: Fill in the blank with the appropriate article, *a*, *an*, or *the*, or leave the space blank if no article is needed.

1. I want _____ eggplant from that basket full of eggplants.
2. Miss Lewinski speaks _____ Chinese.
3. I borrowed _____ pencil from your pile of pencils and pens.
4. One of the students said, " _____ professor is late today. I will tolerate this no longer."
5. Eli Butterfield likes to play _____ tennis.
6. I bought _____ umbrella for the school play, which is about umbrellas.
7. My daughter is learning to play _____ violin at her school.
8. Is your mother working in _____ old office building on Kisspan Lane?
9. _____ computer has revolutionized the field of stalking.
10. I have no doubt that _____ chimpanzee named Eli Butterfield will come to my rescue.
11. There was _____ professor carrying an armful of umbrellas past the equipment shed.
12. My school's _____ tennis team decided to stop using rackets.
13. Whenever it rains, _____ local zoo smears butter on the sidewalks.
14. _____ music room was filled with the sound of screeching apes.
15. After placing _____ can of lipstick in _____ basket of _____ corn stalks, we played _____ Chinese checkers.
16. _____ symphony, which had been written in _____ pen, dictated that all stringed instruments be played *pizzicato*, and that _____ conductor take all _____ bows.