Indefinite and Definite Articles

Articles are small words that are often used before nouns or noun phrases. There are two articles: a/an (the “indefinite article”) and the (the “definite article”). Like adjectives, they belong to a group of words called “determiners,” which give additional information about nouns.

One of the biggest challenges for non-native speakers of English is learning when to use indefinite or definite articles.

These are the general rules:
To talk about something that is not specific or not known by both the speaker and the listener/reader, use the indefinite article.

I need to buy a new wide-angle lens for my camera. (any lens)
She used an elegant fabric to line her coat. (an unspecified fabric)

To talk about something that is specific or known by both the speaker and the listener/reader, use the definite article.

Did you understand the art history lecture? (this specific lecture)

Use of a or an
The use of a or an depends not on how the word that follows is spelled, but on how it is pronounced.

Use a before a consonant sound.

a Ghanaian mask a new brush a one-day art show a European director

Use an before a vowel sound.

an interesting film an undiscovered painting an hour-long class an FBI agent

Jobs/Types/Generalities
In English, a/an is normally used with a singular noun that is used for classifying — saying what job somebody has; what class, group, or type somebody or something belongs to; what something is used for; etc.

He’s a curator at the RISD museum.  [He’s curator…]
The painter used an old bed sheet as a canvas.  […as canvas.]

To talk about people or things in general, the is not usually used with uncountable or plural nouns.

Lee’s studying interior architecture.  [NOT: …the interior architecture]
The Cable Car Cinema often shows foreign films.  [NOT: …the foreign film]

Place Names
In place names, use the in these categories:

seas: the Mediterranean rivers: the Imjin
oceans: the Pacific mountains: the Andes
island groups: the Maldives deserts: the Mojave
most hotels: the Ritz most theaters: the Avon
most museums: the Frick
Physical Environment and Time

Use the with parts of the natural world or a specific environment, with weather, and with moments in time. The in these cases suggests that everyone is familiar with what is being talked about.

- the sun
- the future
- the ocean
- the mountains
- the wind
- the past
- the fog
- the forest
- the rain
- the present
- the cold
- the snow

The can be used with any season (winter, spring, summer, autumn), but it is only mandatory with the fall.

Note that the is not used with abstract nouns such as nature, society, or space when they have a general meaning (see Singular and Plural handout on count and non-count nouns).

Plein-air painting is done on location, surrounded by nature.
Egon Schiele’s portraits reflect his rejection of bourgeois Austrian society.

Superlatives

Use the with superlative adjectives, and with adjectives such as first, next, last, same, and only:

- the newest member of the Graphic Design department
- the last paper I wrote for Art History 101

Famous or Well-Known People

Use the with people, or groups of people, who are famous or known by most listeners/readers:

- Dale Chihuly, the glass sculptor
- the pioneering photographer Dorothea Lange

Art therapy can open new lives of creativity for the differently-abled.
Muralist painter Diego Rivera often depicted the Mexicans’ struggles against their oppressors.

The Only One (or Ones) of a Kind

Use the in expressions with the ... of ... to mean there is only one (or one group) of its kind.

- the Museum of Fine Arts
- the Quilts of Gee’s Bend