

Articles

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

What is an Article?

An article is a word used with a noun to demonstrate the type of reference being made by the noun. Articles are usually classified as definite or indefinite.

There are three articles you need to understand and apply:

1. a
2. an
3. the

How to Use “a” and “an”

Need to decide between “a” and “an”? These two general rules should work in all cases:

1. Use “a” if the noun or noun phrase makes a consonant sound.
2. Use “an” if the noun or noun phrase makes a vowel sound.

You will use “a” or “an” for unspecified people, things, or events and for numbers or quantity.

- I need **a cup** of coffee.
- I spoke to **an officer**.
- We visit my family three times **a year**.
- My commute takes **a quarter of an hour**.
- The drinks were sold for 50 cents **a litre**.

See how these rules apply in these six cases.

1. Use “a” for nouns that start with consonants

- a school
- a baby
- a banana

2. Use “an” for words that begin with a silent “h”

- an hour
- an honest child
- an honour

3. Use “an” for nouns that start with vowels

- an institution
- an Italian
- an apple

4. Use “a” for nouns that start with vowels, but make a consonant sound

- a university
- a European
- a one-parent family

5. Use “an” for initialisms that start with A, E, F, H, I, L, M, N, O, R, S, or X

An **initialism** is a term formed from the initial letters of several words or parts of words. It is an abbreviation where each letter is pronounced separately. For example, ESL (for “English as a Second Language”) and UTM (for “University of Toronto Mississauga”) are initialisms. Initialisms cannot be pronounced as words. <https://www.uis.edu/cas/thelearninghub/writing/handouts/grammar-mechanics-and-style/acronyms-initialisms-and-capitalization/>

An **abbreviation** is a shortened form of a word or a phrase. <https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/abbreviations>

An **acronym** is an abbreviation from the initial components of a phrase or a word. Acronyms are pronounced as words. For instance, NAFTA and SWOT are acronyms. <https://www.uis.edu/cas/thelearninghub/writing/handouts/grammar-mechanics-and-style/acronyms-initialisms-and-capitalization/>

Examples 5 and 6 go over the rules for initialisms. You can treat acronyms as regular words when deciding to use “a” or “an.”

- an MP
- an FBI agent
- an IOU

6. Use “a” for initialisms that begin with all other letters

- a BYOD policy
- a DYK fact

Four ways to use “the”

1. Use “the” when you are discussing things that are unique

- the world
- the horizon
- the climate
- the sky
- the human race
- the sea
- the atmosphere
- the ground
- the arms trade

2. Use “the” for general geographical areas

- the beach
- the countryside
- the country
- the forest
- the town

3. Use “the” when referring to time in these cases

- the past
- the present
- the future

4. Use “the” when you make generalizations about classes of things using single countable nouns

- The computer has revolutionized publishing.
- The computer is an important research tool.

Both examples refer to computers in general.

When you do not need to use an article

You do not need to use an article:

- before the name of an individual person or place

However, there are a few exceptions to this rule.

Exception 1: Some countries

- the United States of America
- the United Kingdom
- the Philippines

Exception 2: Referring to an entire family

- The Grants are away this weekend.

Exception 3: Using an adjective to describe a person

- the late Buddy Holly
- the artist Pablo Picasso

“A” and “an” exercises

Choose the either “a” or “an” for each of the following words.

1. ___ unpaid bill
2. ___ DIY shop
3. ___ MA in Russian Literature
4. ___ Euro
5. ___ Olympic medal
6. ___ AGM
7. ___ U-turn
8. ___ heirloom
9. ___ NASA space launch
10. ___ UN decision
11. ___ SOS message
12. ___ F grade
13. ___ hero

Article exercises

Choose either “a”, “an”, “the”, or no article for the following sentences.

1. It is ___ best cake I have ever had.
2. The Pacific Ocean is ___ biggest ocean in ___ world.
3. We are going on holiday with ___ Smiths
4. I found myself talking to ___ Barack Obama.
5. I am ___ delivery driver for UPS.
6. What kind of computer do you use? It is ___ Mac.
7. Let me introduce you to my friend ___ John Kowloon.
8. This is ___ most valuable diamond in ___ world.
9. I want to get ___ best price for this book.
10. Albert Einstein was ___ scientist.

Answers to the “a” and “an” exercises

1. **an** unpaid bill
2. **a** DIY shop
3. **an** MA in Russian Literature
4. **a** Euro
5. **an** Olympic medal
6. **an** AGM
7. **a** U-turn
8. **an** heirloom
9. **a** NASA space launch
10. **a** UN decision
11. **an** SOS message
12. **an** F grade
13. **a** hero

Answers to the Article exercises

1. It is **the** best cake I have ever had.
2. The Pacific Ocean is **the** biggest ocean in **the** world.
3. We are going on holiday with **the** Smiths.
4. I found myself talking to Barack Obama.
5. I am **a/the** delivery driver for UPS.
6. What kind of computer do you use? It is **a** Mac.
7. Let me introduce you to my friend John Kowloon.
8. This is **the** most valuable diamond in **the** world.
9. I want to get **the** best price for this book.
10. Albert Einstein was **a** scientist.

More resources for using articles

Article Basics – Writing Centre, Walden University

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/articles>

Articles – Writing Centre, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/articles/>

Using Articles – UofT Writing Advice

<http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/english-language/articles/>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops: <https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.