

When to Use “A,” “An,” “The”

Count and Non-Count Nouns

A count noun is the name of something we can count: one book, two books, three books.

A non-count noun is the name of something we cannot count: milk, flour, freedom, justice. A non-count noun does not take "a" or "an" and does not have a plural form.

| | Use "a" or "an" | Use "the" | Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" |
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| General Rules | <p>Use "a" or "an" with a singular count noun when you mean "one of many," "any," "in general."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bob is a student (one of many students). • I like a good movie (one of many movies). | <p>Use "the" with any noun when the meaning is specific; for example, when the noun names the only one (or one) of a kind.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adam was the first man (the only 'first man'). • New York is the largest city in the United States (only one city can be 'the largest'). • We live on the earth (the only Earth we know). • Have you heard the news (specific news)? | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" with a non-count noun when you mean "any," "in general."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We believe in love (in general). • He gave me information (not specific). |

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| | <p>Use "a" or "an" the first time you use a noun in a paragraph</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I saw <u>a movie</u> last night. • <u>A man</u> ran into the street. | <p>Use "the" the second time you use that same noun in the same paragraph</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I saw <u>a movie</u> last night. <u>The movie</u> was entertaining. • <u>A man</u> ran into the street. A car hit <u>the man</u>. | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" with a plural count noun when you mean "some of many things," "any," "in general."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movies are entertaining (some movies; movies in general). • She likes men (in general). |
| Title | <p>Use "a" or "an" if the title is not a specific title.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a president • a doctor • a queen | <p>Use "the" if a specific person has a title or if only one person has a title.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the president • the doctor • the Queen of England | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" if the person's name is given.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Kennedy • Dr. Yang • Queen Elizabeth |
| Names of Countries | <p>Non-specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a country | <p>Use "the" if the name of the country is plural or indicates a group (of states, islands, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the United States • the Netherlands • the Phillipines | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia • South Africa • Holland • Canada • Great Britian • England |
| Names of Continents | <p>Non-specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a continent | | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Africa |

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| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asia • Europe • North America |
| Names of Some Geographical Areas | | Use "the" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the South Pole • the West • the South • the North East | Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western Europe |
| Names of Cities and States | Non-specific <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a city • a state | | Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New York • Paris • Washington Exception: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the District of Columbia |
| Names of Streets | | | Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pennsylvania Avenue • Fourth Street • Florida Avenue |
| Names of Oceans, Rivers, Seas, Deserts, Forests, Canals | Use a/an for non-specific <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an ocean • a river • a sea • a desert | Use "the" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Pacific Ocean • the Mediteranean Sea • the Potomac River | |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the C & O Canal • the Atlantic Ocean • the Painted Desert | |
| Names of Lakes | <p>Non-specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a lake | | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lake Ontario • Lake Geneva |
| Names of Monuments, Memorials, Parks, and National Shrines | <p>Use a/an if you write about a non-specific building or monument.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a building • a museum • an institution | <p>Use "the"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Capitol • the White House • the Senate Office Building • the Sam Rayburn Building • the National Archives • the Library of Congress • the National Gallery of Art • the Smithsonian Institute | |
| Names of Colleges, Universities, and Other Schools | <p>Use a/an for non-specific colleges or schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a school • a university | <p>Use "the" if the title of the school has "of" or "for" in it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the University of Maryland • the Catholic University of | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" if the school is named for a person or place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gallaudet University • Harvard University |

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| | | <p>America</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Maryland School for the Deaf • The Model Secondary School for the Deaf | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George Washinton University • Georgetown University • Maryland University • Catholic University |
| <p>Names of Buildings on a University Campus</p> | <p>Use <i>a/an</i> for non-specific buildings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a dorm • an office | <p>Use <i>the</i> with specific places that have no names.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the infirmary • the library • the dorm • the cafeteria • the bookstore | <p>Don't Use "a," "an," or "the" if a building on campus is named for a person.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peet Hall • Ely Center • Dawes House • Krug Hall • Hall Memorial Building • Hughes Gymnasium • Merrill Learning Center • Kendall School |