Abstract vs. Concrete

(Concrete nouns can be touched; abstract nouns represent ideas.)

Single concrete nouns must be modified by articles:

Right—The car is parked by the curb.
Wrong—Car is parked by curb.
Right—I know the dog needs exercise.
Wrong—I know dog needs exercise.

Plural concrete nouns may or may not be modified by articles:

Right—The cars are in the garage.
Also right—Cars are in the garage.

Abstract nouns may or may not be modified by articles:

Right—The love of my life was in high school.
Right—The peace lasted for three years.
Right—The wars of the 20th century were terrible.

However, these indefinite, abstract nouns without articles are also correct:

Also right—Love is wonderful. (all love)
Also right—War is terrible. (all war)
Also right—Wars cost many lives.

English Articles

A An The

General vs. Specific

A and an are the two articles that are used with general, indefinite nouns:

I like to eat a vegetable each day. (any vegetable)
I like to munch on an apple every day. (any apple)
A horse needs lots of exercise. (any horse)
An apple each day is good for one’s health. (any apple)

On the other hand, the is the article that is used with specific, definite nouns:

I don’t want to eat the peach he gave me since it is overripe.
This morning I saw the policeman who stopped me yesterday.
The dog in my neighbor’s yard is very friendly.
The teacher in that classroom is quite helpful.

Notice the in each sentence refers to a specific person or thing.
Singular vs. Plural

*A* and *an* are the two articles that are always used with singular nouns, but *a* and *an* are not used with plural nouns:

**Singular**—I like to eat a **vegetable** each day.

**Plural**—I like to eat **vegetables** each day.

**Singular**—I like to munch on an **apple** every day.

**Plural**—I like to munch on **apples** every day.

**Singular**—A **horse** needs lots of exercise.

**Plural**—**Horses** need lots of exercise.

**Singular**—An **apple** each day is good for one’s health.

**Plural**—**Apples** each day are good for one’s health.

On the other hand, *the* is the article that is used with either **singular or plural nouns**:

**Singular**—I don’t want to eat the **peach** he gave me since it is overripe.

**Plural**—I don’t want to eat the **peaches** he gave me since they are overripe.

**Singular**—The **dog** in my neighbor’s yard is very friendly.

**Plural**—The **dogs** in my neighbor’s yard are very friendly.

Vowel Sounds vs. Consonant Sounds

When deciding between *a* and *an*, one must listen to the sound of the noun that *a* or *an* modifies.

*A* is used before nouns that start with a **consonant sound**:

**A giraffe** is the tallest animal in the zoo.

I bought a **car** that is only slightly used.

**A wedding** in June is quite traditional.

**A skyscraper** is many stories tall.

**An** is used before nouns that start with a **vowel or vowel sound** (*a, e, i, o, u*) since it is very difficult for Americans to say *a* just before a vowel sound:

I like to eat an **apple** each day.

**An ice** cream cone in the summer is refreshing.

May I borrow an **umbrella** since it’s raining?

We can leave in an **hour** or so.

On the other hand, *the* can be used before either **consonant or vowel sounds**:

**The giraffe** is the tallest animals in the zoo.

I always eat the **apple** with its skin.

The clock always chimes on the **hour**.