

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.

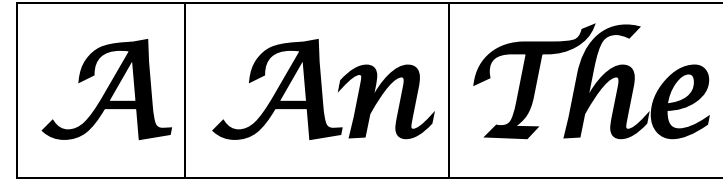
However, these **indefinite, abstract nouns without articles** are also correct:

Also right—**Love** is wonderful. (all love)

Also right—**War** is terrible. (all war)

Also right—**Wars** cost many lives.

English Articles



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**.

