Definite and Indefinite Articles

There are 3 possibilities to use articles in English:

- The indefinite article “a” or “an”
- The definite article “the”
- No article at all

**Singular count nouns:** Nouns that can be counted and have a plural form, example: an apple, a student.

**Plural count nouns:** Nouns in their plural form, example: bananas, pens.

**Non-count nouns:** Collective nouns, example: furniture, family.

- **Indefinite Articles—** *a*, *an*
  
  *an*—used before singular count nouns beginning with a vowel (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) or vowel sound:
  - an apple, an elephant, an issue, an orange

  *a*—used before singular count nouns beginning with consonants (other than *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*):
  - a stamp, a desk, a TV, a cup, a book

Used before singular nouns that are unspecified:

- a pencil
- an orange
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Used before number collectives and some numbers:
• a dozen  
• a gallon

Used before a singular noun followed by a restrictive modifier:
• a girl who was wearing a yellow hat that day was Lucy.

Used with nouns to form adverbial phrases of quantity, amount, or degree:
• I felt a bit depressed.

➤ Definite Article—the
Can be used before singular and plural, count and non-count nouns

Used to indicate a noun that is definite or has been previously specified in the context:
• Please close the door.  
• I like the clothes you gave me.

Used to indicate a noun that is unique:
• Praise the Lord!  
• The Columbia River is near here.

Used to designate a natural phenomenon:
• The nights get shorter in the summer.  
• The wind is blowing so hard.

Used to refer to a time period:
• I was very naïve in the past.  
• This song was very popular in the 1980s.

Used to indicate all the members of a family:
• I invited the Bakers for dinner.  
• The Smiths invented this medicine.

References - The following works were used during the creation of this handout: Indefinite and Definite Articles.