Articles A, An, The

The articles a, an, and the are known as noun markers because they mark or signal a noun.

Noun markers include the following parts of speech:

- The articles a, an, and the;
- Possessive nouns, such as Elena’s;
- Possessive pronouns/adjectives, such as my, your, his, her, its, our, their;
- Demonstrative pronouns/adjectives, such as this, that, these, those;
- Quantifiers, such as all, any, each, etc.; numbers.

In the English language, nouns that can be counted, when singular, always require a noun marker.

- A counting noun is something you can count. Example: flowers, books, eggs, teachers, movies, meals, etc.
- A mass noun (non-counting noun) cannot be counted. Example: water, milk, heat, kindness, etc.

Rule #1: When a singular noun is mentioned for the first time with no other noun marker, use a (or an).

- I saw a dog wandering on the street.
  o (Use a as noun marker as the dog is mentioned for the first time.)
- Later, the dog was at my neighbor’s house.
  o The specific dog referred to earlier.
- I saw an elephant at the zoo.
  o (Use an since elephant begins with a vowel and the first time mentioned.)
- I wonder if there is an elevator at the end of the hall.
  o (Use an because the noun begins with a vowel.)
- One person was standing.
  o (One is already marking the noun, so no other noun marker is needed.)
- I stubbed my toe on a rock.
  o (My is already marking the noun, so no other noun marker is needed.)

Rule #2: Use the when talking about specific people or things, for both singular and plural nouns.

- The dog probably belongs to our neighbor.
- The dogs were very hungry.
  o (The does not change when plural.)
- The drivers were all honking their horns.
  o (Their marks the noun horns.)
Rule #3: When speaking generally about plural counting nouns or mass nouns, noun markers are not required.

- A woman came to my door yesterday. The woman was collecting donations for the local food bank.
  o (No noun marker is needed before donations because it is plural and used in a general sense.)
- My friend was carrying books, pencils, and an umbrella.
  o (Books and pencils are plural counting nouns in a general sense and do not require noun markers. Umbrella is singular and requires a noun marker.)
- My desk is covered with dust.
  o (Dust is a mass noun being used in a general sense, so no noun marker is needed.)
- The dust must have blown in from the nearby construction.
  o (In this sentence, dust is specific.)
- I found flowers on my desk this morning.
  o (No noun marker is needed because flowers is being used in a general sense.)
- The third floor is the hottest because heat rises.
  o (Heat is a mass noun in a general sense, so no noun marker is needed.)

Rule #4: Use a noun marker to change the meaning of a sentence by making the noun being referred to specific.

- Bad behavior makes teachers angry.
  o (Teachers is used in a general sense.)
- Bad behavior makes the teachers angry.
  o (A specific group of teachers)

See A Writer’s Reference, pp. 233-41, for additional information and examples.