

A

Rule 1: Indefinite articles are used for previously unknown nouns that are being introduced into a dialogue or story and definite articles are used for nouns that have already been introduced (or are already known or are assumed to be known at the point of introduction to the conversation).

For example:

*I saw **a** cat. **The** cat was sitting on **a** fence. **The** fence was painted brown. **The** cat jumped off **the** fence when it saw **a** mouse. **The** mouse ran into **a** hole when it saw **the** cat so **the** cat didn't catch **the** mouse.*

In this example, the nouns *cat*, *fence*, and *mouse* take an indefinite article, but only when they are introduced for the first time. After they are introduced, we use the definite article in every instance. This pattern, or rule, covers a lot of basic instances of concrete nouns, especially in story telling. This rule can extend over long periods of time and interrupted dialogue so that I can ask you to buy **a pen** and then several hours later I can ask you if you bought **the pen**.

The

Rule 2: When a Noun is Unique, Use a Definite Article

Another important rule is when something is unique* or, in other words, there is only one of that object. In this case, the definite article is used. *The sun, the president, the queen of England, the capital city, and the moon* are all examples. This is especially true for objects that are well known by many or most people, but it is true even when the hearer may not know the object:

A: *Who's he?*

B: *He's **the** president of Korea. She's **the** CFO. He's **the** mayor.*

This can be contrasted with:

A: *Who's she?*

B: *She's **a** member of parliament. She's **an** accountant. He's **an** alderman.*

This uniqueness can come by association:

***A** car crashed into a tree. **The** driver was seriously injured.*

Once we established (introduced) the car, there could only be one driver so *driver* was unique at the time of introduction and we use *the driver* instead of *a driver*. We could

have rewritten this so that driver was not unique (and the car was) when it was introduced:

*A driver was seriously injured when **the** car he was driving crashed.*

A driver can only be driving one car at a time so car is unique in this instance once driver was introduced.

This exception applies to superlatives (which are usually unique in occupying the extreme position or quality): *the best place, the worst thing, the fastest runner, the tallest mountain, and the most interesting person I've ever met.* This can be contrasted with comparatives such as *a better mouse trap* where several better mouse traps are possible.



Rule 3: When we are speaking of a noun in general we usually leave the article out and, if it is countable, use the plural form.*

So for example, when we are talking about an actual cookie or cookies that really exist or existed we use an article (definite or indefinite). In the following examples, we are speaking of specific/actual/real cookies.

*I ate a cookie.
The cookie was delicious.
The cookies are on the table.
I made some cookies for you.*

However, we can also make general statements about cookies. And when we do speak in general of cookies, we leave the articles out.

*I like cookies.
Cookies contain a lot of sugar.
Kids shouldn't eat cookies every day.
I enjoy making cookies.
I never eat cookies at night.*

It is possible to either use an article or leave it out, but the meaning will be different in each case:

I like cookies.
(A general statement concerning cookies)
I like the cookies.
(A statement about some specific cookies that I've actually tasted)

It should be noted that when we do speak in general we *commonly* use the plural form** of the noun if it is a countable noun (and just the noun if it is not countable).

Cookies are bad for your health.
(Cookie is countable and therefore put into the plural)

Pizza is bad for your health.
(Pizza is uncountable and left as is)

Articles with Proper Nouns

1. Indefinite articles *a* or *an* are not used with proper nouns.
2. The definite article *the* is used only in certain places.

Proper Names

Ahmed Ali
David Wang
The Wangs

Use the with the names of seas, rivers, oceans, deserts, or other landmarks:

the Atlantic Ocean
the International Dateline
the Black Sea
the Mohabi Desert

Use the with the names of plural mountains, lakes, and islands but not with singular names:

Mount St. Helens
Lake Michigan
the Hawaiian Islands
the Rocky Mountains

Do not use the with the names of continents, countries, states, provinces, or cities. Use the, however, with the name of a country if it is plural, if it contains the word united or union, or if you use an official name that includes an of phrase:

the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China
the country of Spain, the state of Minnesota, the city of Tokyo
China, Europe, Asia, Mexico
the Philippines, the United States, the United Kingdom

Do not use the with the names of streets, parks, or squares.

Rodeo Drive
Central Park
Berkeley Square

Do not use the with the name of a college or university unless it contains an of phrase:

National College
the University of Minnesota

Do not use the with the name of a company unless the name includes the word association, company, corporation or foundation:

Honeywell
the 3M Company
Honda
the Toyota Company
the McKnight Foundation
the Eaton Corporation
Productivity Inc.

Use the with the names of most buildings, structures, or bridges, but not if the name includes the word hall:

the Hilton Hotel
the Statue of Liberty
Lind Hall
the Golden Gate Bridge