

## Vocabulary Building

**Article** – Specific words that, in English, often come before nouns. The articles in English are: *a/an* and *the*.

**Noun** – A person place, thing, or idea.

**Count Noun** – A noun that can be made plural. For example: pens, cats, chairs, promises, etc.

**Non-count Noun** – A noun that cannot be made plural. For example: sunshine, English, luggage etc.

**Vowel Sound** – A sound made by the lungs and vocal cords only, without the use of friction. These sounds are: A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y. Some sounds might start with another letter, like “hour,” but if the “h” is silent, the sound is still considered a vowel sound.

**Consonant Sound** – Any sound that is not a vowel sound. These sounds use friction produced by the tongue, teeth, or lips. Examples: B, C, D, M, Z, F.

### Are there more unfamiliar words?

Look up words you don’t know on the Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary at [www.learnersdictionary.com](http://www.learnersdictionary.com).

## Want More Practice?

There are staff in the Learning Center who would love to help you with your writing!

### The College Skills Zone

The College Skills Zone is a great place to engage in conversations that help you understand concepts, especially some basic grammar concepts, and then practice those skills. The College Skills Zone is a place where you can just drop in anytime during open hours.

### The Writing Center

The Writing Center assistants are trained to help you with any aspect of the writing process, from understanding an assignment, to brainstorming, to revising your essays. You can drop in during open hours or make a 30-minute appointment for a specific time.

### English Language Learner Specialist

A specialist for English Language Learners, Sarah Mosser, is available in the Learning Center during certain hours for drop-in or appointments. Because her schedule varies, it is best to make appointments.

**Sarah Mosser**

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*Linn-Benton*  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
WRITING CENTER

Grammar

Articles



## Go-To Guides

*Go-To Guides are designed to help in all areas of the writing process.*

## A Brief Explanation

Articles, *a*, *an*, and *the*, are very common words in English, yet they can be hard for English Language Learners simply because these words don't exist in all languages.

**So when do we use articles in English?** The simplest explanation is that articles are used before nouns — people, places, things, or ideas. However, articles are not used before all nouns and they are not used before every noun every time.

### A/An

As a general rule, *a/an* is used if something is both singular (instead of plural) and countable. A count noun is a noun that *can* be made plural—we can have one cat or three cats, for example.

Examples: This morning, I saw **a** dog chasing **a** cat.

**An** owl was outside my window all night last night.

When do we use *a* and when do we use *an*?

**When the following word is a consonant sound**, we use *a*. Example: a cat, a dog, a compromise, a promise.

**When the following sound is a vowel sound, even if the word starts with a consonant**, we use *an*.

Example: an hour, an honorable man, an apple, an unpaid bill.

### The

Simply put, we use *the* when we are referring to a specific thing (or plural things) that both the speaker and listener are aware of; when both people know what specific thing is being referred to. We can use *the* before both count or non-count nouns.

For example, if I were to say, “I saw a dog chase a cat,” I would be saying that I just saw some random dog chase some random cat. But if I were to say, “I saw the dog chase the cat,” I would be talking about a specific dog and a specific cat that the person I'm talking to also knows about.

I could also say, “The dogs chased the cat” if there were multiple dogs and the speaker knew which dogs I was referring to.

### No Articles

When we are talking about a noun in general, we make it plural and don't use an article. Let's look at this a bit:

If I were to say, “Dogs chase cats,” what I am saying is that dogs in general, any or most dogs, will generally chase any or most cats. I am not talking about one specific dog, but all dogs and all cats.

## Examples

**General Summary:** *A/an* is for singular people, animals, places, things, or ideas that are not specific. We only use *a/an* with nouns that are count nouns— nouns that *could* be made plural and still make sense. For example, we don't say “dirts” so we couldn't say “a dirt.”

**The** is for specific people, animals, places, things or ideas, whether the noun is countable or not. We could say, for example, “the dirt” in a sentence like “The dirt on the carpet won't come out easily.”

**No articles** are used when we are talking about a noun in general terms. For example, “Dirt seems to get everywhere in this house.”

### Examples:

A dog ran right in front of my car today.

The cat scratched up my couch today.

Dogs are man's best friend.

In the first sentence, the dog was just some random dog—not a specific dog that the speaker or listener knew of. In the second sentence, we're talking about a specific cat, possibly the speaker's cat, and the listener knows which cat we're talking about. In the third sentence, we are talking about dogs in general—all or most dogs.

Let's look at some more difficult examples:

Negotiations can be tiresome.

The compromise left both people unhappy.

A promise is important to keep.

Even though the above nouns, *negotiations*, *compromise*, and *promise* aren't things, they are still considered countable nouns. I can make one promise or two, I can make many negotiations or none, and there can be multiple compromises. Therefore, these nouns follow the same rules as any other noun.

**Remember, we only use *a* or *an* with nouns we can count.** If you're not sure whether a noun is countable or not, see if it makes sense as a plural noun, or if it makes sense with a number in front of it (we would say two pens but not two informations). If not, then don't use *a/an*.

## Try it Out!

### True or False?

1. T F Articles are easy for people to learn because they are part of every language.
2. T F We use *a* when the next word starts with a consonant, even if the consonant makes a vowel sound.
3. T F We don't use *a/an* when we make the noun plural.
4. T F *The* should only be used when both the speaker and the listener already know what is being referred to.
5. T F *An* should be used when the next word starts with a vowel sound.

Answers: 1. F 2. F 3. T 4. T 5. T

### Count or Non-Count?

Put a “C” next to all the nouns that you think are count nouns. These would all make sense if they were to be made plural. Put an “N” in front of nouns that are non-count nouns, or would not make sense as plural nouns.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ pen
2. \_\_\_\_\_ sand
3. \_\_\_\_\_ uncle
4. \_\_\_\_\_ love
5. \_\_\_\_\_ patience
6. \_\_\_\_\_ water
7. \_\_\_\_\_ tree
8. \_\_\_\_\_ bread
9. \_\_\_\_\_ James
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Mt. Hood

Answers: 1. C 2. N 3. C 4. N 5. N 6. N 7. C 8. N 9. N 10. N

### A or An?

Fill in the blank with either *a* or *an*. Remember, it's all about the first *sound*, not necessarily the letter itself.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ plum
2. \_\_\_\_\_ apple
3. \_\_\_\_\_ melon
4. \_\_\_\_\_ orange
5. \_\_\_\_\_ old banana
6. \_\_\_\_\_ harp
7. \_\_\_\_\_ anchor
8. \_\_\_\_\_ family
9. \_\_\_\_\_ hour
10. \_\_\_\_\_ uncle

Answers: 1. A 2. An 3. A 4. An 5. An 6. A 7. An 8. A 9. An 10. An

### Article or no article?

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate article. If there should not be an article, leave it blank.

1. In general, \_\_\_\_\_ cats are usually quieter than \_\_\_\_\_ dogs.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ dog next door barks all day long.
3. This morning, I saw \_\_\_\_\_ old dog that seemed lost. It was wandering around \_\_\_\_\_ park across \_\_\_\_\_ street.