THE USE OF ARTICLES IN ENGLISH: SOME CONDITIONS

Most difficulties with articles (whether to use a/an, the, or no article) can be resolved by understanding the differences between a countable and an uncountable noun.

- A countable noun stands for a person or thing that can be counted as a single unit or item. Examples: book, apple, teacher, suitcase, tree.

- An uncountable or non-countable noun stands for something that cannot be counted as a single unit or item. Types of non-countable nouns include:
  1. Mass nouns, referring to a quantity of some substance. Examples: water, air, oil, oxygen, tea, ink, dirt.
  2. Abstract nouns, such as liberty, honesty, life, truth, justice, beauty.
  3. Names of general areas of subject matter, such as history, art, science, music, economics, English.
  4. Names of sports or recreational activities, such as baseball, tennis, golf, singing, dancing.

With this distinction in mind, the charts below will enable you to determine in most cases which article (or no article) to use.

**Singular Countable Nouns**

IF a single item whose specific identity is not known to the reader; use A/AN

- I want a book on history.
- I need a person to help me.
- Did you buy a hat?

IF a specific or particular item; use THE

- I want the book on your desk.
- The boy from next door helped me.
- Did you buy the green hat or the red?

**Plural Countable Nouns**

IF general; use NO ARTICLE

- Books are needed by all students.
- She needs to buy shirts when she goes shopping.
- Teachers like students to use articles correctly.

IF specific or particular; use THE

- I got the books I needed.
- The apples I ate yesterday made me sick.
- The ex-Presidents of the United States appeared at Target last Saturday.
**Noncountable Nouns**

IF general; use NO ARTICLE  
Baseball is a popular sport in Japan. 
She drinks tea every afternoon at four o’clock. 
Honesty is the best policy.

IF specific or particular; use THE  
The advice that she gave me was helpful. 
I bought the paper that was the cheapest. 
The honesty of the government is questionable.

Adapted from *Mastering American English* by Hayden; Pilgrim and Haggard

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**THE USE OF ARTICLES IN PLACE NAMES: SOME GUIDELINES**

Particularly difficult in many cases is determining whether to use the definite article (the) or not before place names. Here are the major rules and exceptions.

**Names of countries - NO THE**  
Austria, Canada, Bangladesh, Italy, Thailand, China

**EXCEPTIONS**  
Plural country names: the Philippines, the Netherlands 
Names with Union or United: the United States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics 
Full official names: the Republic of Cuba, the Kingdom of Sweden 
Geographical regions: the Ukraine, the Congo, the Sudan

**Names of mountains, lakes, islands, beaches, cities, streets, parks, falls, colleges - NO THE**  
Mount Baldy, Lake Arrowhead, Greenland, Zuma Beach, Pomona, Sixth Street, MacArthur Park, Niagara Falls, Riverside Community College

**EXCEPTIONS**  
Groups of mountains, lakes, islands, cities, etc.: the Andes Mountains, the Great Lakes, the Maldives Islands, the Twin Cities, the Claremont Colleges 
Names with an “of” prepositional phrase following them: the Avenue of the Americas, the City of Brotherly Love, the University of California at Riverside, the Island of Majorca
Names of peninsulas, deserts, oceans, rivers, gulfs, zoos, tunnels, gardens, buildings - use THE
the Balkan Peninsula, the Mojave Desert, the Mississippi River, the Holland Tunnel, the San Diego Zoo, the Museum of Modern Art

EXCEPTIONS
Buildings named Hall: Independence Hall, Great Hall
Buildings named House or Library may or may not have THE: The White House, Blair House, The Huntington Library, Honnold Library

Adapted from the Index to Modern English by Crowell