Articles

Function and Types
An article is a part of speech used to indicate a noun and to specify a noun’s function. In English, articles are placed before nouns. The English articles are a, an, and the, and they fall into two categories: definite and indefinite.

THE is called the definite article, meaning that the noun following it is specific.
   Example: Where is the dog? (a specific dog)

A and AN are indefinite articles, meaning that the nouns following them are nonspecific.
   Example: Do you have a book? (any book) I want an apple. (any apple)

Whether to use the singular indefinite article A or AN depends on the noun, or noun phrase, that follows:

A precedes words beginning with consonant sounds:
   Example: a horse • a unicycle • a suitcase • a big igloo

AN precedes words beginning with vowel sounds:
   Example: an honor • an Oregon resident • an F • an orange bicycle

Note that F takes “an” because although it starts with a consonant, it has the sound of a vowel: “eff.” Also, the long u, like in unicycle, has the sound of the consonant y, and the consonant h is often silent, like in honor.

Usage
New information is usually signaled by the indefinite article. Old or previously mentioned information is usually signaled by the definite article.

   Example: NEW: A face appeared in the window.
            OLD: The face was familiar.

The Relationship Between Noun Type and Article Use

Count nouns refer to a single entity, but can be plural, and they can be used with numbers or terms like many, several, and few (cat: four cats; plant: many plants). Count nouns can use either the definite or indefinite article (a book / many books / the books; an egg / several eggs / the egg).

- Non-count nouns can be broken down into two groups: mass nouns and abstract nouns.
  - A mass noun refers to something that can’t be broken into countable parts and does not form plurals (water, hair, information).
  - Abstract nouns refer to concepts (contentment, beauty, peace). Non-count nouns may take the definite article (The water is hot. The soft light really brings out the beauty in this painting). But non-count nouns do not take the indefinite articles a or an.
Exceptions
As with most rules in the English language, there are always situations that don’t seem to follow the norm:

Common “A” Construction Usage

The article “a” has several particular usages. These are instances where “a” is always used:

- With fractions and with frequencies
  Example:  half a gallon
             three times a day

- After “what” and “such” and before singular nouns in exclamations
  Example:  What a thing to say!
             He’s such a jerk.

- Before “few” and “little” in positive sentence constructions
  Example:  I still have a few minutes before I have to leave.
             I am only a little bit sore.

- As part of the phrases “lot of”, “number of”, “great/good deal of” when these are quantities
  Example:  You seem to have a lot of free time.
             I received a number of complaints from customers.
             There was a great/good deal of water on the floor.

Nouns That Can Go Either Way

Some mass nouns can play the role of count nouns.

Example:  I remember a time when people had morals.      It looks like we’re almost out of time.

In this example using time, the word in the first sentence refers to a specific time (e.g. the good old days) whereas the second example is referring to time in general.

Other examples:  It’s unpleasant, but it’s a dry heat.   The stove is giving off heat.
                 That black eye is a beauty.   Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.