

LUC WRITING CENTER: “ARTICLES A, AN, AND THE”

Often, it can be confusing to figure out which article to use before a noun – **a**, **an**, or **the**. Using **a** or **an** before a noun depends on whether the first letter of that word is a vowel or consonant. *You use **an** before a vowel, and **a** before a consonant.* For example:

*I ate **an** apple.
I ate **a** pineapple.*

*The man was **a** friend.
The man was **an** enemy.*

Words beginning with a silent “**h**” like “hour” are the only exception to this rule.

*You were gone for **an** hour.*

If the “h” is voiced, as in the word “house,” the article **a** is used, according to the usual rule.

*He went into **a** house.*

Articles reveal what a person, place, or thing signifies in context. Your choice between using **a/an** or **the** depends on your meaning, since these two articles imply different degrees of importance.

For example, consider the difference between the following sentences:

*I gave food to **a** dog.
I gave food to **the** dog.*

In the first sentence, “**a** dog” is not particularly important. He is not being specifically indicated. The speaker simply gave food to some dog. In the second sentence, however, “**the** dog” becomes the central focus. It now seems important to single out that dog as the recipient of the food.

Observe the following example in which a wife asks her husband about a household chore:

*Sally: “John, did you feed **the** dog?”
John: “I fed **a** dog.”*

By using the article **a** instead of **the**, John seems to be saying *that he gave food to **a** stray dog, not **the** family pet Sally specifically wants to be fed.*

*Sally: “John, did you feed **the** dog?”
John: “I fed **the** dog.”*

Now that John has used the right article for the situation, *we know that the right dog has been fed, and that both Sally and John have the same animal in mind.*