Using the English Articles A, An, and The

There is no simple, single rule for handling the articles a, an, and the in the English language. However, there are three rules that will cover most cases, and if we get those rules right, then all we have to worry about are the exceptions. Let's boil it down to these three basic rules.

**Rule #1:** The first time a singular, countable, non-unique noun that does not have a specific name is introduced, use an indefinite article (i.e., "a" or "an").

Examples:

- A cow is in the field.
- An apple is on the table
- A river is running through the woods

**Exception to Rule #1:** If you are talking about “all, everywhere” of that noun, using the definite article “the” is allowed (you can also use the indefinite).

Examples:

- The cow is a good animal for food ("A cow is a good animal for food" is also acceptable).
- The dog is a good animal for a pet ("A dog is a good animal for a pet" is also acceptable).

**Rule #2:** The first time plural or uncountable nouns are introduced, or if the plural or uncountable noun is for “all, everywhere,” use no article.

Examples:

- Cows are in the field (plural and they are being introduced).
- Peanut butter is in the refrigerator (uncountable and it is being introduced).
Cows are a good source for food (this refers to all cows, everywhere).

Rule #3: Use the definite article (i.e., "the") when referring to a particular or unique noun. This includes nouns that have already been introduced.

Examples:

When talking about the head of our garden club, we might say: The president of the garden club is Mrs. Ditherspoon.

If we only want to point out that she is the head of a garden club, and we don't care which garden club, we might say: Mrs. Ditherspoon is the president of a garden club.

I saw a cow. The cow was eating grass (the first time we use cow, it is introduced).

We have peanut butter in the refrigerator (peanut butter is being introduced). The peanut butter is almost gone.

The Mississippi River is long and fast (use “the” because it is a unique noun).

Just to reiterate, using Rule #1 and Rule #3 means that sentence order may determine whether you use an indefinite article or a definite article for a particular sentence. Compare the following two lines:

I saw a cow in a field. The cow was eating grass in the field.

The first sentence introduced a cow and a field. The second sentence referred to the cow and the field that we introduced in the first sentence.

A cow was eating grass in a field. I saw the cow in the field.

The same thing applies here. The first sentence introduces a cow that is eating grass in a field. The second sentence refers to the cow and the field that were introduced in the first sentence.

Here is another example of using Rule #1 and Rule #3:

I saw a flower while I was on a walk this morning. The flower was red. In fact, the flower was so beautiful, I bent down to smell it. I saw a bee on the flower. The bee was busy, flying back and forth.
Anyway, the flower had no odor to it. I reached out to touch the flower, and I discovered that the flower was plastic. Perhaps that is why the bee was so busy; the bee was trying to find pollen, but there was none. I enjoyed the walk this morning.

More on Unique Nouns

For geographic locations, it can get tricky. Often it is the case that if the geographic location was named after a person, no article is used: Mount Rushmore, Pike's Peak, Bryson Canyon, Lake George.

For mountain ranges, use the definite article (the Rocky Mountains, the Appalachian Mountains). For specific mountains (Mount Mitchell, Mount Everest, Little Big Horn) do not use an article.

Normally, with bodies of water, the definite article the should be used with rivers (e.g., the Mississippi River, the Nile River) but not with lakes (e.g., Lake George, Jordan Lake). The Great Salt Lake is an exception.

For oceans, use the definite article (the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean).

When referring to states as “State of ...” use the definite article. For example, the State of Iowa, the State of Nebraska, the State of North Carolina, etc. When referring to them by name only, do not use an article. Example: I grew up in Iowa. I grew up in the State of Iowa.
This flow chart does not take exceptions into account. It will cover most cases though.

- START
  - Is the noun unique or does it have a specific name?
    - YES: Use The (in general)
    - NO
      - Is this for “all, everywhere”?
        - YES: The
        - NO
          - Was the noun already introduced?
            - YES: The
            - NO
              - Is it singular?
                - YES
                  - Is it countable?
                    - YES: A / An *
                    - NO: None
                - NO: None
              - NO: None
            - NO: None
    - NO: None

* If “all, everywhere,” can also use The
Rule 1

The first time a singular, countable, non-unique noun is introduced, use an indefinite article (a or an); after that, use the definite article (the) for that noun.

Practice

Fill in the blanks with a, an, or the, or leave it blank if no article should be used.

I started reading ______ book by Willa Cather this morning. ______ book features ______ boy named Jimmy, who moves to Black Hawk, Nebraska, to live with his relatives.

______ book by Cather was excellent. Each page would contain ______ sentence that stirred up memories of when I lived in Nebraska. In the book, ______ boy (Jimmy) has ______ grandmother and ______ grandfather in Nebraska. ______ grandmother is friendly. I haven't met ______ grandfather yet.

We have ______ Korean exchange student, _____ boy, living with us. ______ boy's name is Brian, and he is ______ very good student. ______ boy (Brian) ate ______ apple after lunch today. ______ apple was delicious. Then he had _____ pear, _____ mango, and _____ glass of milk.

Brian, ______ boy who is living with us, is really nice. He is learning how to write poetry. He wrote ______ poem this morning about ______ red flower.

We went to the Outer Banks for Christmas. There is ______ beach there that is very nice. It was too cold to do much at _____ beach, but we had a good time.

Papa has ______ tuba. ______ tuba (Papa's tuba) can be very loud. ______ tuba (Papa's tuba) has four valves and ______ very large mouthpiece. Papa blows into ______ mouthpiece when he wants to play ______ song. When he presses ______ valves, different notes come out.

There is ______ hawk outside. I hope _____ hawk doesn't eat our chickens!
Rule 2
The first time a plural or uncountable noun is introduced, use no article. If the plural or uncountable noun is used for “all, everywhere,” use no article.

Practice

Fill in the blanks with a, an, or the, or leave blank if no article should be used.

I like to watch ______ cows. When I am driving and I see ______ cows in ______ field, it makes me want to sing. Seeing ______ cows reminds me of my childhood. When I was little, we would visit Grandpa's farm. Grandpa had ______ cow, and it was magical. The magical thing about ______ cow was that it could fly! When Grandpa needed to go into town to buy something from the general store, he would ride on ______ cow. In general, ______ cows do not fly. In fact, this was ______ only cow that I ever saw fly.

______ crowds came from all over to see Grandpa's flying cow. Once, ______ crowd came on a Friday night and stayed until Sunday morning. Grandpa had not noticed ______ crowd at first, until he went outside and someone asked for his autograph. ______ crowds make Grandpa feel uncomfortable, especially when they step on his toes.

Yesterday, at lunch, I ate ______ peanut butter. In fact, I made ______ peanut butter sandwich. On ______ peanut butter sandwich, I included ______ banana. I love ______ bananas. I also love ______ ice cream, but usually I will eat ice cream in ______ bowls and rarely do I put ice cream on ______ peanut butter sandwiches.

______ Football games are fun to watch. Nebraska played in ______ bowl game this year. Nebraska did very well in ______ bowl game. I hope that I can watch ______ football games next year too.

I like playing ______ football in the backyard too.
Rule 3

Use a definite article (e.g., "the") when referring to a particular or unique thing, including something that has already been introduced.

Practice

Fill in the blanks with a, an, or the, or leave blank if no article should be used.

_____ State of Iowa is bordered by _____ Mississippi River on _____ east side and _____ Missouri River on _____ west side. West of _____ Iowa is _____ State of Nebraska.

Last summer, we went fishing in _____ Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. _____ lakes in Minnesota are very pretty. We also drove along _____ Lake Michigan, _____ Lake Superior, and _____ Lake Huron. In Utah is _____ Great Salt Lake, which is _____ largest salt water lake in the United States.

Learning about _____ presidents is interesting. Obama is _____ president of the United States right now. There are other presidents too. Mildred is _____ president – she is _____ president of _____ library book club (a specific club). Sally is _____ president – she is _____ president of _____ neighborhood flower club (non-specific club).

Our football team had several coaches last fall. Dad was _____ coach; Scot was a coach; Todd was a coach; and Larry was a coach. We had some good coaches!

_____ Grand Canyon is a beautiful place! _____ Mount Rushmore is also amazing. I would love to go visit _____ Arctic Circle some day.

I saw a cow in the field. _____ cow was brown and white. _____ cow was with its mother and it looked very happy. I like _____ cows. Do you like _____ cows?
Rule 1
The first time a singular, countable, non-unique noun is introduced, use an indefinite article (a or an); after that, use the definite article (the) for that noun.

Practice Answers

Fill in the blanks with a, an, or the, or write X if no article should be used.

I started reading ___a___ book by Willa Cather this morning. ___The_ book features ___a___ boy named Jimmy, who moves to Black Hawk, Nebraska, to live with his relatives.

___The_ book by Cather was excellent. Each page would contain ___a___ sentence that stirred up memories of when I lived in Nebraska. In the book, ___the_ boy (Jimmy) has ___a___ grandmother and ___a___ grandfather in Nebraska. ___The_ grandmother is friendly. I haven't met ___the_ grandfather yet.

We have ___a___ Korean exchange student, ___a___ boy, living with us. ___The_ boy's name is Brian, and he is ___a___ very good student. ___The_ boy (Brian) ate ___an___ apple after lunch today. ___The_ apple was delicious. Then he had ___a___ pear, ___a___ mango, and ___a___ glass of milk.

Brian, ___the_ boy who is living with us, is really nice. He is learning how to write poetry. He wrote ___a___ poem this morning about ___a___ red flower.

We went to the Outer Banks for Christmas. There is ___a___ beach there that is very nice. It was too cold to do much at ___the_ beach, but we had a good time.

Papa has ___a___ tuba. ___The_ tuba (Papa's tuba) can be very loud. ___The_ tuba (Papa's tuba) has four valves and ___a___ very large mouthpiece. Papa blows into ___the_ mouthpiece when he wants to play ___a___ song. When he presses ___the_ valves, different notes come out.

There is ___a___ hawk outside. I hope ___the_ hawk doesn't eat our chickens!
Rule 2

The first time a plural or uncountable noun is introduced, use no article. If the plural or uncountable noun is used for “all, everywhere,” use no article.

Practice Answers

Fill in the blanks with a, an, or the, or write X if no article should be used.

I like to watch __X___ cows. When I am driving and I see __X___ cows in __a___ field, it makes me want to sing. Seeing __X___ cows reminds me of my childhood. When I was little, we would visit Grandpa's farm. Grandpa had __a___ cow, and it was magical. The magical thing about __the___ cow was that it could fly! When Grandpa needed to go into town to buy something from the general store, he would ride on __the___ cow. In general, __X___ cows do not fly. In fact, this was __the___ only cow that I ever saw fly.

__X___ crowds came from all over to see Grandpa's flying cow. Once, __a___ crowd came on a Friday night and stayed until Sunday morning. Grandpa had not noticed __the___ crowd at first, until he went outside and someone asked for his autograph. __X___ crowds make Grandpa feel uncomfortable, especially when they step on his toes.

Yesterday, at lunch, I ate __X___ peanut butter. In fact, I made __a___ peanut butter sandwich. On __the___ peanut butter sandwich, I included __a___ banana. I love __X___ bananas. I also love __X___ ice cream, but usually I will eat ice cream in __X___ bowls and rarely do I put ice cream on __X___ peanut butter sandwiches.

__X___ Football games are fun to watch. Nebraska played in __a___ bowl game this year. Nebraska did very well in __the___ bowl game. I hope that I can watch __X___ football games next year too.

I like playing __X___ football in the backyard too.
Rule 3

Use a definite article (e.g., "the") when referring to a particular or unique thing, including something that has already been introduced.

Practice Answers

Fill in the blanks with a, an, or the, or write X if no article should be used.

_The__ State of Iowa is bordered by _the__ Mississippi River on _the__ east side and _the__ Missouri River on _the__ west side. West of __X___ Iowa is _the__ State of Nebraska.

Last summer, we went fishing in _the__ Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. __X*__ lakes in Minnesota are very pretty. We also drove along __X___ Lake Michigan, __X___ Lake Superior, and __X___ Lake Huron. In Utah is _the__ Great Salt Lake, which is _the__ largest salt water lake in the United States.

Learning about __X___ presidents is interesting. Obama is _the__ president of the United States right now. There are other presidents too. Mildred is __a___ president – she is _the__ president of _the__ library book club (a specific club). Sally is __a___ president – she is _the__ president of __a___ neighborhood flower club (non-specific club).

Our football team had several coaches last fall. Dad was __a___ coach; Scot was a coach; Todd was a coach; and Larry was a coach. We had some good coaches!

_The__ Grand Canyon is a beautiful place! __X___ Mount Rushmore is also amazing. I would love to go visit _thee__ Arctic Circle some day.

I saw a cow in the field. _The__ cow was brown and white. _The__ cow was with its mother and it looked very happy. I like __X___ cows. Do you like __X___ cows?

* Using “The” in this case is acceptable also.