

## 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.

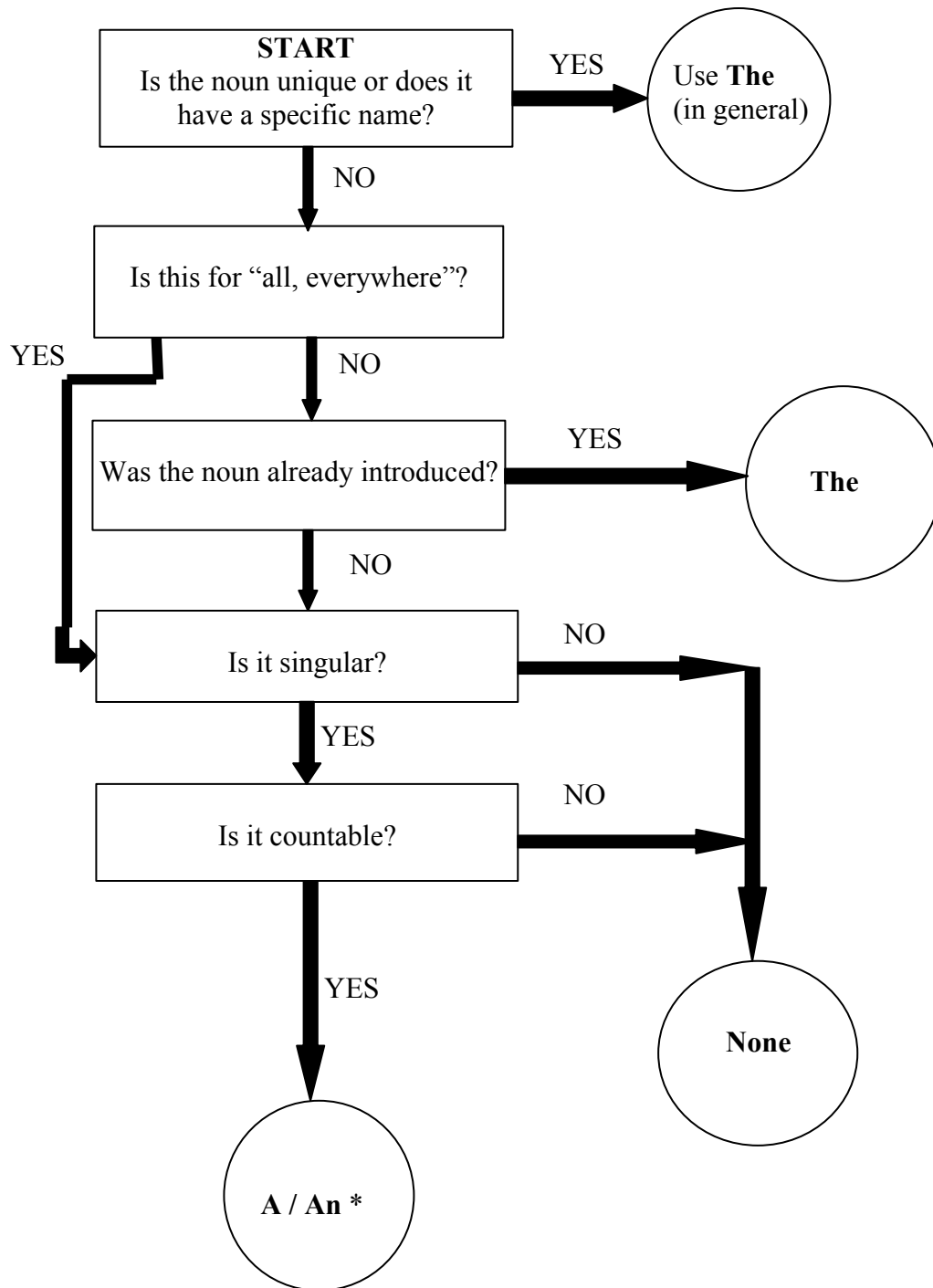
For mountain ranges, use the definite article (the Rocky Mountains, the Appalachian Mountains). For specific mountains (Mount Mitchell, Mount Everest, Little Big Horn) do not use an article.

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.



\* 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.

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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.

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## Rule 2

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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.

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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).

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\_The\_ Grand Canyon is a beautiful place! \_X\_ Mount Rushmore is also amazing. I would love to go visit \_the\_ 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.