

Choosing Articles: The or A(n)*

This handout will help you choose the right article. It describes the most common examples, but please note there are exceptions to some of these rules.

To make the right choice, we need to know what our options are, we need to understand what a noun is, we need to know what different types of nouns exist, and we need to know how to choose the right article given what the noun is referring to.

A decision about an article always begins with a noun (person, place or thing). This noun may or may not require an article, and this is a decision we must make. Do we need an article? And if we decide we do, which article should we choose—definite (*the*) or indefinite (*a/an*)?

A **definite article** is used when it refers to singular or plural nouns that are particular or exact. **THE** is the definite article.

Examples: the person next door, the prime minister of Canada, the books on that shelf

An **indefinite article** is used when it refers to general, non-specific nouns or to indicate membership in a group and is used on singular and non-countable nouns. **A** is the indefinite article. (AN before words beginning with a vowel sound).

Examples: We are going to see a movie tonight. She is an accountant. I have a class at noon.

Sometimes **no article (Ø)** is required. When we are making indefinite or generic references to non-count nouns, we usually do not use an article.

One way we can decide if we need an article and if it should be definite or indefinite is by asking the following ordered questions. The context and kind of noun, if properly determined, will tell you whether you need an article and, if so, which article you must use.

1) What does the noun refer to?

First, we need to determine what the noun refers to. There are only three possibilities the noun refers to :

Noun Possibilities:	Type of reference	Type of article	Examples
All things everywhere	Generic	Ø, the, a/an	Dogs are everywhere in this city. The internet is awesome. A doctor is highly educated.
One thing of many	Indefinite	(a/an) or (Ø)	Please bring cookies. A dog just barked at me.
This thing exactly	Definite	(the) or (Ø)	I played with the dog. My research is great.

Answers to the next questions will begin to guide your decision.

2) Is the noun a non-count noun or a count noun?

Count nouns are things that can be counted discretely (we can have 1, 2 or 3 of them). Count nouns take on singular or plural properties and this helps us choose a definite or indefinite article.

A count noun can be singular or plural, but a non-count noun, because it cannot be counted, does not fit into a singular/plural system. Nevertheless, it might still require an article.

Type	generic	indefinite	definite
singular	the	a/an*	the
plural	∅	∅	the

—*dog, car, house* (*dogs, cars, houses*) are **count nouns** (we can have 1,2,3 or more of them).

“*Cars* filled the parking lot.”

“The *house* at the end of our street is haunted.”

“A *dog* wandered into the restaurant.”

a* and *an* are two versions of the indefinite article, and using one version or the other is based on a smooth sounding transition from article to noun. Use **a before words beginning with consonants or the vowel sounds *y* or *w*; use **an** before a noun beginning with a vowel or vowel sound other than *y* or *w*.

Non-count nouns cannot be counted.

Type	generic	indefinite	definite
non-count	∅	∅	the

—*water, food* and *lightning* are **non-count nouns** (we cannot normally count these things) .

“My school was struck by *lightning*.”

“Mother gave **the** *food* to me.”

“Jill gave me *food*.”

“*Water* sustains life.”

- 3) Is the noun a proper noun? A proper noun begins with a capital letter, and identifies a unique person, place or thing. Proper nouns are **always definite**, but depending on context may or may not take on an article. Generally people and places that are singular do not take on an article, while places that are collective or regional do. A good tip if you are unsure is to use a dictionary or google the noun and observe how it is used in context.

Type	generic	indefinite	definite
proper			Ø, the

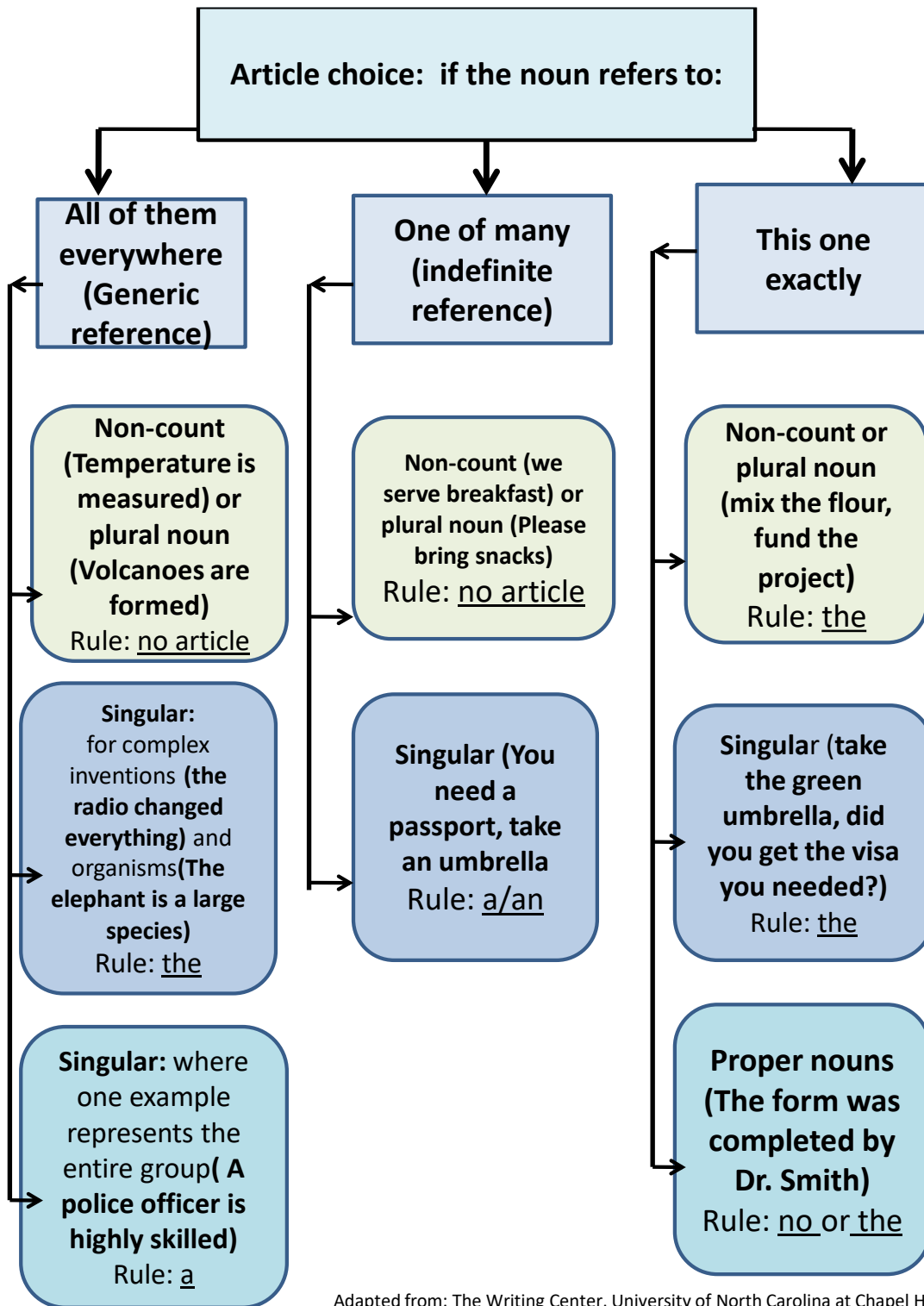
“[Mary](#) walked home with the dog.”

“I went to [Niagara Falls](#).” (an exception)

“I saw the [Pacific Ocean](#).”

“I went to the [Grand Canyon](#).”

Consider the chart on page 4 to help you decide:



Adapted from: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill