

# UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

*20+ years of student success*

www.csulb.edu/uwc

(562) 985 - 5162

SSC - 245

## Articles

**Overview:** In many ways, the choice of which article to use belongs to you, the writer. Using articles correctly can help signal to your reader whether you are referring to something specific or something non-specific.

**Articles** are similar to adjectives because they modify nouns. English has two articles: “**the**” and “**a/an**”. “**The**” is used to refer to specific nouns; “a/an” is for non-specific nouns. Therefore, we call “**the**” the definite article and “**a/an**” the indefinite article. Remember to use “a” in front of nouns that start with a consonant sound, and “an” in front of nouns that start with a vowel sound.

### Example 1

*Definite article:* Let’s go see *the* movie.

In this sentence, the speaker is talking about a specific movie. He or she wants to see Jurassic World, or the latest Avengers movie. Not just any movie.

*Indefinite article:* Let’s go see *a* movie.

In this sentence, the speaker is willing to see any movie, it doesn’t matter which one.

### Example 2

*Definite article:* I want to climb *the* mountain.

The “the” indicates that there is one mountain in particular that the speaker wants to climb.

*Indefinite article:* I want to climb *a* mountain.

The “a” indicates that the speaker wants to climb a mountain, but it doesn’t matter which one.

## Count and Non-Count Nouns

**Non-count Nouns** either use “*the*” or no article at all.

*Non-count noun with “the”:* I swam in *the* **water**.

The article could be removed from this sentence and it would still be grammatically correct, but it makes more sense with “the” since a specific body of water is being discussed.

*Non-count noun with no article:* My young niece hates **homework**.

The little girl hates homework in general, but since “homework” is non-count, even if she hated a specific kind of homework, we would say “math homework” or “history homework”, not “the homework”.

**Count Nouns** require an article or another sort of determiner (like a possessive pronoun).

*Count noun with “a”:* Please hand me *a* **bottle** of water.

Copyright (C) 2016. All rights reserved. This handout is part of a library of instructional materials used in California State University, Long Beach’s writing center, the Writer’s Resource Lab. Educators and students are welcome to distribute copies as long as they do so with attribution to all organizations and authors. Commercial distribution is prohibited.

Any bottle of water will be ok.

*Count noun with "the":* Please hand me *the* **bottle** of water.

A specific bottle of water is wanted.

*Count noun with "my":* Please had me *my* **bottle** of water.

The speaker's personal bottle of water is wanted.

**Practice:** Keep in mind that mass nouns, proper nouns, and plural nouns don't require articles, but countable singular nouns always do. Again, as the writer, it's up to you whether you use *the* or *a/an*—just make sure that your article choice is consistent with the meaning you are trying to convey.