



Articles: Indefinite vs. Definite

According to the Holt Handbook (HH) sixth edition, the two articles in the English language are *a* and *the*. The main function of an article is to act as a signal to the audience to let them know if the noun that is being referred to is new to the discussion or has previously been mentioned (791-92).

Indefinite Article:

A is the indefinite article. *A* is replaced with *an* if the word that follows it begins with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) or with a vowel sound.

EXAMPLES:

a book

an apple

an honor

Use *a* if the vowel is pronounced like a consonant.

EXAMPLE:

a onetime offer

Using Indefinite Articles:

An indefinite article (*a* or *an*) should be used with nouns when the reader is unfamiliar with the noun that is being named—when you are introducing a noun for the first time.

EXAMPLE:

Justin entered a building.

This signals to the audience that the idea of the building is being introduced in the speech or writing for the first time. The building is therefore indefinite or not specific until it has been identified.

Definite Article:

The is the definite article.

Using Definite Articles:

A definite article (*the*) should be used with nouns being named that have already been introduced. The use of a definite article indicates that the noun being introduced may already be familiar to the readers/listeners.

EXAMPLE:

Justin entered the building.

This signals to the audience that the building being referred to is the same building mentioned earlier. Now that the building is specific it may be referred to with a definite article.

*All information on this handout came from 6th ed. The Holt Handbook and/or the 4th ed. Brief Handbook. If you distribute this handout, please note that it came from the University of South Carolina Aiken Writing Room. For more information, please see the 4th ed. Brief Holt Handbook chapter 47, pages 517 to 518. You can also visit <http://kirsznermandell.wadsworth.com> for additional help.