Articles

What is an article?

Similar to an adjective, articles modify nouns.

1) English articles:

THE (called the definite article, it is used to refer to specific nouns)

A/AN (called indefinite articles, they are used to modify non-specific nouns)

Examples:
1. I went to the movie theater and saw the new movie.
2. I went to the movie theater and saw a movie.

EXPLANATION: In Example #1, there was only ONE new movie, so the definite article was used to specify the fact that the movie that was watched was the ONE movie that was new. In contrast, in Example #2, I could have watched the new movie OR an old movie that was playing at the theater. So, I could have watched ANY movie.

2) Characteristics of the Definite Article: The definite article is optional with NON-COUNT nouns which are grammatically singular:

Examples:
1. He spilled cinnamon on the floor.
2. He spilled the cinnamon on the floor.

EXPLANATION: In Example #1, he spilled ANY cinnamon on the floor. However, in Example #2, he spilled SPECIFIC cinnamon on the floor: the cinnamon that we were going to use to bake cookies.

3) If you are using a definite article to specify your noun, please remember to check:

- Do your readers know what specific noun you are referring to?
- Has the context made your use of the definite article clear?

Examples:
1. The woman at the bus stop is attractive.
2. The woman is attractive.
EXPLANATION: In Example #1, the use of the definite article is appropriate because the audience knows that you are referring to a SPECIFIC woman: the one at the bus stop. However, in Example #2, the use of the definite article is inappropriate because the audience does not know to whom you are referring.

4) Characteristics of the Indefinite Article:

There are two indefinite articles:

- Use *A* in front of words that begin with consonants.
- Use *AN* in front of words that begin with vowels or vowel SOUNDS.
- Do not use the indefinite article with NON-COUNT nouns which are grammatically singular.

*Examples:*

1. I saw lightning in Tucson.
2. I saw a lightning in Tucson.

EXPLANATION: In Example #1, there is no indefinite article in front of the NON-COUNT noun. In Example #2, there is an INCORRECT indefinite article in front of the NON-COUNT noun; NON-COUNT nouns are grammatically singular and cannot be indefinite.

5) Use an indefinite article with singular COUNT NOUNS when they are preceded by an adjective.

*Examples:*

- I saw a tiny little girl run across the road.
- I saw tiny little girl run across the road.

EXPLANATION: In Example #1, the indefinite article is used correctly to indicate the fact that ANY little girl ran across the street. However, in Example #2, the indefinite article is missing, and the sentence is grammatically incorrect. The singular noun must have an article that indicates whether it is definite or indefinite.