

The words a or an and the are called articles. Articles come before nouns.

There are two articles - a/an and the

The article a or an is called the indefinite article because it doesn't state which person or thing we are talking about.

For example, *a doctor* means *any doctor*.

*A child* means *any child*.

The article the is called the definite article because it points out a particular person or thing.

Compare:

You must consult the doctor. (Which doctor? It could be your family doctor.)

You must consult a doctor. (Which doctor? It could be any doctor. Here the speaker does not have a particular doctor in mind.)

The indefinite article (a/an) is used before singular countable nouns. It cannot be used before plural nouns.

We can say *an apple* or *a tree*, but not *an apples* or *a trees*.

The definite article (the) can be used before singular countable nouns, plural countable nouns and uncountable nouns.

We can say, *the book*, *the books*, *the rice* or *the milk*.

A or an

The choice between a and an is determined by sound and not spelling. A is used before words beginning with a consonant sound. Examples are: *a boy*, *a tree*, *a ball*, *a flower*, *a horse*, *a hole*, *a European* and *a university*.

An is used before words beginning with a vowel sound. Examples are: *an elephant*, *an egg*, *an orange*, *an umbrella*, *an hour*, *an heir* etc.

What are articles?

Note that some native speakers use an before words beginning with h if the first syllable is not stressed.