ARTICLES

The articles a, an, and the help your reader understand whether you're using a noun in an indefinite (general) or definite (specific) way.

A and an are indefinite articles, and mean the same thing as the number one.

Take a pencil. (Take one pencil.)

I won a hundred dollars. (I won one hundred dollars.)

The articles a and an are also used to identify nouns in a general or indefinite way and refer to any member of the group.

He likes to read a book. (She likes to read any book, not a specific one.)
That was a funny story. (That was one of many funny stories.)

Use a when the word following it starts with a consonant sound.

a book, a hospital, a leg, a one-inch pipe, a youth,

Use an when the word following it starts with a vowel.

an apple, an opera, an eagle, an idea, an SOS (the s here is an es sound)

Words that begin with u or h can have either a vowel or a consonant sound. Make the choice based on the sound of the first word after the article, even if that word is not the noun.

a union, a uniform (use a when the u sounds like the y in you)
an unbelievable event, an umbrella, a unique umbrella
an honor, an hour, an honest person
a hotel, a history book, a historian
an historian, an historic event (NOTE: words like historic can take either a or an)

The is a definite article, and identifies nouns in a particular or specific way, or refers to someone or something that is one of a kind.

Give me the book on the table. (identifies a specific book)
The sun rose at seven o'clock. (identifies something that is one of a kind)

The is also used to refer to a someone or something that has been previously mentioned. This chapter has a reading passage. The passage is about language.
Use a or an to introduce a noun the first time it is mentioned, and then the is used afterwards whenever the noun is mentioned.

Proper nouns that use the.
Nouns with the pattern: the _____ of _____
   the United States of America  the fourth of July
   the President of Mexico  the University of Paris
   the Statue of Liberty

Plural proper nouns
   the Johnsons  the Rocky Mountains
   the Chicago Bulls  the Falkland Islands
   the United Kingdom  the Sahara

Collective proper nouns (nouns that name a group)
   the European Economic Community
   the Society of Friends

Some geographical features
   the Amazon  the Gobi Desert  the Indian Ocean
   (but not all!) Lake Superior  Mount Central Park

When trying to decide whether to use an article, ask for help if you need it. Every time you learn a new use of an article, write it down.

Exercises for practice. Fill in the blank spaces with the correct article.
At Rutgers University there was _____ conference of some of _____ most creative women in _____ world. Most of _____ speakers were women writers who had achieved success in their fields. They spoke of some of _____ greatest difficulties they had faced as creative, independent women. One of _____ best-known writers there was Lillian Hellman. She had written excellent plays and novels about American life. Emily Hahn _____ magazine writer who has written _____ lot about China, was also there. These women told _____ audience what it felt like to be _____ woman in _____ man's world fifty years ago. For centuries, _____ heart was regarded with awe by physicians. As _____ result, _____ first surgeon to cut into _____ human heart had to overcome many fears and superstitions. Asked to guess when this surgery was first tried, most people would say in _____ middle of _____ twentieth century. Heart surgery actually was first performed in 1893 by _____ African-American surgeon named Daniel Hale Williams. _____ injured man was brought to _____ Chicago hospital with _____ knife wound in _____ heart. Surgeon Williams cast aside age-old taboos and dared to operate -- successfully -- on _____ heart.