Articles (A, An, The)

Terms to know:
**Indefinite Article** — a (or an if the noun begins with a vowel sound)
**Definite Article** — the
**Count (Countable) Noun** — A noun that can be made plural or counted (book, books, three books).
**Non-count (Uncountable) Noun** — Nouns that usually cannot be counted or made plural (furniture, flour, weather).
**Zero Article** — This refers to use of a noun with no article before (as in Snow is white.)

To decide which article to use, determine what type of noun is being described.

**Count and Non-Count Nouns**

**Singular Nouns**

- Use *a* (an) with a singular count noun (never with a non-count or plural noun).
  
  **Example:** Give me *a* pen. (refers to an unspecified pen)
  
  *An* elephant damaged this tree. (refers to an unspecified elephant)

- Use *a* if someone (or something) is one out of a group of many.
  
  **Example:** I discussed it with Dr. Martin, *a* professor in the Philosophy Department. (refers to a specific person)

**Nouns with General Reference**

- Use *no article and the singular form* of the noun to refer to a general type of something.
  
  **Examples:** I went there by *bus*.
  
  *Time* flies when you’re having fun. (general idea of time)

- Use *no article and the plural form* of the noun to refer to a noun in general — meaning all things or persons referred to by that noun.
  
  **Examples:** *Students* often come here to see me. (refers to all types of students)

- Use *a(n) or the* for the general meaning of all types, species, or items referred to by the noun, especially to a species or type of something (a more formal usage).
  
  **Examples:** *A* lion is *an* interesting animal.
  
  *The* lion is *an* interesting animal.
Nouns with Definite Reference

- Use the with count or non-count nouns, in singular or plural, when the reader (or listener) knows what definite or specific thing is being referred to by the noun. Often an of phrase or that clause makes something specific.
  Examples: Give me the pen. (referring to a specific pen that the reader/listener knows)
  The development of this system is recent.
  The information that he gave me was wrong.
  The medicines in my cabinet are effective.

- Some adjectives can also make a noun unique and definite.
  Examples: Give it to the first person to arrive.
  The only way to do the job is to work hard.
  Talk to the next customer.

- Use the with many specific geographical features or regions when there is an adjectival form in the name.
  Examples: It sank in the Allegheny River.
  We went to the Rocky Mountains.
  My sister vacationed in the Hawaiian Islands.

- Use the when the noun is something specific because it is unique.
  Examples: The earth revolves around the sun, and the moon revolves around the earth.
  I left my coffee cup in the kitchen. (when there is one kitchen in the house)

- Use the when you want to point out a particular group and exclude other groups.
  Examples: The bus drivers in this city are very friendly. (specific contrast with other groups)

Nouns Using Zero (No) Article

- Use no article before the noun with non-specific, non-count nouns, plural count nouns, and names or titles (such as movies, people, or books).
  Examples: There was evidence to prove it. (non-specific, non-count noun)
  I need money. (non-specific, non-count noun)
  I don't like raisins. (plural count noun)
  Take the patient to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital. (name of a hospital)
  Texas Chainsaw Massacre is a great movie. (title of a movie)

*Some nouns can be count or non-count, depending on the context.
  Examples: She has red hair. (in this instance, hair is non-count, and refers to a whole head of hair)
  There is a hair in my soup. (in this instance, hair is a count noun)
A Brief Quiz

Fill in the blanks with a/an, the, or 0 for no article.
Answers may vary in some contexts, but sample answers are below.

My hobby is oil painting. I often go to (1)____ museum to look at (2)____ various paintings. Among the artists, I preferred (3)____ canvases of Maurice Utrillo, (4)____ French painter who mainly drew Montmartre in Paris. Utrillo had three phases in his painting life: (5)____ “montagny period,” (6)____ “colorist period,” and (7)____ “white period.” I prefer (8)____ paintings from the last phase. (9)____ first paintings he did are only like imitations of (10)____ impressionists. (11)____ paintings from (12)____ “colorist period” give us (13)____ cheerful but too bright impression. On the other hand, Utrillo’s paintings from (14)____ “white period” move me deeply. (15)____ whitish colors mixed with (16)____ various tones make me feel melancholy. In addition, (17)____ various tones of whites give me (18)____ impressions of loneliness and isolation. I enjoy viewing (19)____ Utrillo’s paintings alone to feel those moods and emotions that he only gives us through his “white period,” and when I paint (20)____ pictures, I often imitate these tones because I wish to create (21)____ similar melancholy feeling.