The definite article *the* generally signals a *particular* person or thing that has been singled out from others.

*the* student sitting next to you

The indefinite article *a* signals an *unspecified one* among others.

*a* student sitting in the front row

The following rules are among the most important in the use of articles.

1. An article (or another determiner) *must* appear with a singular countable noun.

   The letter was sent yesterday.

   *A* (or *the*) lion is a wild animal. (*Lion* is a class word in this general statement. The plural *lions* [with no *the*] may also be used to express this same generalization.)

2. *A* is not generally used with noncountable nouns. If indefinite reference is desired with such nouns, *some* is used instead.

   I need some milk.
   Please give me some information.

3. *The* usually does not occur with noncountable nouns in general statements.

   Everyone requires food, water, and shelter.

4. However, *the* is used with *both countable and noncountable nouns* in the following instances:

A. A modifier follows the noun (especially if the sentence refers to a particular situation).

   COUNTABLE NOUN
   The eggs in the refrigerator are still good.

   NONCOUNTABLE NOUN
   The milk in the refrigerator is still good.
However, if the noun is considered unknown, or if it represents one out of others, *a* is used with a singular countable noun.

A man in the audience suddenly started to shout.

B. The noun refers to an object in the environment that is familiar to or near the speaker.

**COUNTABLE NOUN**
Let's go to the park near the river.

**NONCOUNTABLE NOUN**
Put the milk and the butter in the refrigerator.

5. In extended speech, the first time a person or object is mentioned, *a* is used. Further references to the person or thing are with the.

I recently got a new job. The job is hard but interesting.

6. *The* usually precedes superlatives (*the prettiest, the most beautiful*) and ordinals (*the first, the second*).

7. *A* is required after *such* or *what* used with a singular countable noun.

She is such a pretty girl.
What a pretty girl she is.

8. For geographic names, *the* is used if:

A. The name includes a word for a political union.
   the British Commonwealth, the Venezuelan Republic; the Soviet Union

B. The name includes an of phrase.
The Gulf of Mexico, the City of New York

C. The name is plural.
The Rocky Mountains, the Philippines

D. The word refers to a body of water other than a lake.
The Nile River, the Mediterranean Sea

9. Some words may be used either in a noncountable sense as an abstract idea (a concept) or in a countable sense as something that has actual existence.