Often, it can be confusing to figure out which article to use before a noun – a, an, or the. Using a or an before a noun depends on whether the first letter of that word is a vowel or consonant. You use an before a vowel, and a before a consonant. For example:

I ate an apple.
I ate a pineapple.

The man was a friend.
The man was an enemy.

Words beginning with a silent “h” like “hour” are the only exception to this rule.

You were gone for an hour.

If the “h” is voiced, as in the word “house,” the article a is used, according to the usual rule.

He went into a house.

Articles reveal what a person, place, or thing signifies in context. Your choice between using a/an or the depends on your meaning, since these two articles imply different degrees of importance.

For example, consider the difference between the following sentences:

I gave food to a dog.
I gave food to the dog.

In the first sentence, “a dog” is not particularly important. He is not being specifically indicated. The speaker simply gave food to some dog. In the second sentence, however, “the dog” becomes the central focus. It now seems important to single out that dog as the recipient of the food.

Observe the following example in which a wife asks her husband about a household chore:

Sally: “John, did you feed the dog?”
John: “I fed a dog.”

By using the article a instead of the, John seems to be saying that he gave food to a stray dog, not the family pet Sally specifically wants to be fed.

Sally: “John, did you feed the dog?”
John: “I fed the dog.”

Now that John has used the right article for the situation, we know that the right dog has been fed, and that both Sally and John have the same animal in mind.