USING ARTICLES (A, AN, THE)

What are articles?
They are the tricky little words ‘the’, which is called the **definite article**, and ‘a’ and ‘an’, which are referred to as **indefinite articles**.

If you have difficulty knowing when to use these words and when not to, you are not alone.

**Tips to help you decide**
First, it helps to know the difference between countable and uncountable nouns.

**Countable nouns** can be counted and have a plural form e.g. three lecturers, two universities, six tutorials.

**Uncountable nouns** can’t be counted and don't have a plural form, e.g. water, information, research, equipment.

**Indefinite article**
We use the indefinite article with **singular** countable nouns, e.g.
- There is a tutorial every week.
- There is an antidote to that poison.

**Indefinite article—common uses**
‘A’ and ‘an’ are used with the following.
- Jobs, e.g. She’s an accountant.
- Beliefs, e.g. My friend is a Muslim.
- Numbers, e.g. A thousand people attended.
- Prices, e.g. It is $5 a kilo.
- Speeds, e.g. 45 km an hour
- Nationalities, e.g. The Sydney Opera House is an Australian icon.

**Definite article**
We can use the definite article with
- singular countable nouns, e.g. The lecturer is late.
- plural nouns, e.g. The new computers have arrived.
- uncountable nouns, e.g. The information is very old.

We also use ‘the’ with the following.
- Some geographic names, e.g. The United Arab Emirates, The Indian Ocean, The Pilbara.
- Dates **when spoken**, e.g. The tenth of May.
- Superlatives, e.g. The best meal ever, The most famous actor in Italy. The tallest building in the world.

**Uniqueness**
We use the definite article when something is unique, e.g.
- The sun is shining.
- The Earth is beautiful.

**Indefinite and definite article uses—unknown and known**
We use
- ‘a/an’ when the topic is unknown to the reader or the listener
- ‘the’ when it is known, e.g.

**The Australian Research Council** funded a project on the effects of climate change in 2009. **The** project is due for completion in 2012.

Sometimes the context or a phrase makes a situation/person known, e.g.
- Meet me at the café near the Science Library
- Is the guest lecturer here? Yes, she is in the seminar room already.

**A common use in academic writing**
The +noun+ of, e.g. the development of … The effect of …
We do NOT need to use articles for generalisations in the following cases.
- countable, plural nouns, e.g. **Seminars are instructive**.
- uncountable nouns, e.g. **Information** from the internet is frequently inaccurate.

No article is used for
- **mealtimes**, e.g. Have you had dinner?
- **sports**, e.g. My children play tennis and basketball.
- **illnesses**, e.g. The baby has whooping cough and her father has lung cancer.

No article is needed with idioms such as
- to be on time
- to learn by heart
- to do something by mistake

Examples of the unpredictability of articles
- go to the post office, go to the bank,
- go to school, go home
- in the morning, in the evening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No article is used for</th>
<th>The flow chart below will help you decide which article to use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the noun a proper noun?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Is the noun unique, specific, familiar, or previously identified to the reader?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you count the noun in this context?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Use No article for a non-count generalisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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