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
- ‘an/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.

The flow chart below will help you decide which article to use:

- Is the noun a proper noun? → Yes → Do not use "a" or "an" → Generally use "the" with plurals
- Is the noun unique, specific, familiar, or previously identified to the reader? → Yes → Use "the" or this, that, these, those, my, your, his, her, its, our, or their
- Can you count the noun in this context? → Yes → If singular, use "a" or "an" or the following e.g. another, either, each, every or one
- If plural, use NO article for a generalisation
- Use No article for a non-count generalisation
- or use a quantity word e.g. some, any, other, enough, most, all, certain, little, more, much, less

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

Like this Survival Guide? Why not check out...
Survival Guides: Study smarter not harder, Effective time management, Make the most of tutes, Get the most from lectures, Critical thinking, Working in groups.

Want to know more about STUDYSmarter?
Find out about all our services and resources at: www.studysmarter.uwa.edu.au

Any suggestions?
We’d love to hear from you. Email us at study.smarter@uwa.edu.au

This resource was developed by the STUDYSmarter team for UWA students. When using our resources, please retain them in their original form with both the STUDYSmarter heading and the UWA logo.