USING ARTICLES (A, AN, THE)

What are articles?

Articles are three tricky words: ‘the’ (called the **definite article**), ‘a’ and ‘an’ (together referred to as **indefinite articles**).

If you are unsure when to use these words and when to avoid them, you are not alone.

Do I need to use an article? Which one?

First, it helps to know the difference between countable and uncountable nouns.

**Countable nouns** can be counted and have a plural form, e.g. *two skis, three wins*.

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

The indefinite article

We use the **indefinite article** with non-unique, singular countable nouns, e.g. *there is a tutorial each week; she found an antidote to that poison*.

‘A’ and ‘an’ are used in various situations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instance</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>She is an actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>My friend is a Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>A dozen people attended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prices</td>
<td>It is $5 a kilo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeds</td>
<td>45km an hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalities</td>
<td>He is an Australian citizen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The definite article

We can use the definite article with:

- **Singular countable nouns**, e.g. *The lecturer is late*.
- **Plural nouns**, e.g. *The mice are alive*.
- **Uncountable nouns**, e.g. *The information is very dated*.

We also use the definite article when something is **unique**, e.g. *The sun is shining; The earth is beautiful*.

We also use ‘the’ in the following instances:

- **Some geographic names**, e.g. *The Bahamas, The Arctic Sea, The Pilbara*.
- **Spoken dates**, e.g. *The first of May*.
- **Superlatives**, e.g. *The best meal I’ve had; The tallest building in the world*.

Known and unknown nouns

We use:

- ‘a/an’ when the **topic is unknown** to the reader or listener; and
- ‘the’ when the **topic is known**, e.g. *The Australian Research Council funded a project investigating the effects of climate change in 2018*.

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 Australia’s educational system; the effects of market liberalisation*. 
No articles

We do not need to use articles for generalisations in the following cases:

- **General ideas**, e.g. *Religion* is an important consideration.
- **Countable, plural nouns**, e.g. *Seminars* are instructive [the example, ‘The seminars are instructive’, would refer to a specific set of seminars].
- **Uncountable nouns**, e.g. *Information* from the internet is frequently inaccurate [Adding an article before the word ‘Information’ would be incorrect].

Similarly, **no articles** are used for:

- **Mealtimes**, e.g. *Have you had lunch?*
- **Sports**, e.g. *She plays rugby and golf.*
- Most places and geographic features, e.g. *Perth, Spain, Asia, Mount Doom.*
- **Most illnesses**, e.g. *She has whooping cough, and he has leukaemia.*
- **Some idioms**, e.g. *To be on time; to learn by heart.*

**TIP**

Sometimes articles are **unpredictable** and there is **no clear rule** about their use.

We go to *the post office*, but we go to *school* and go *home*.

We wake in *the morning* and study in *the afternoon* but sleep at *night*.

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**Choosing an article (flowchart)**

You can use the flowchart below to decide when you should use articles and what articles you should use.

**Is the noun...**

- **A proper noun?**
  - If yes: No article for singular; usually ‘the’ with plurals
  - If no:
    - **Unique, specific, familiar or previously identified?**
      - If yes: Use ‘the’ or words like *this, that, your, our, its*
      - If no:
        - **An uncountable noun?**
          - If yes: No article, or use a quantity word (e.g. *some, any*)
          - If no:
            - **A plural noun?**
              - If yes: No article
              - If no:
                - **Beginning with a vowel**
                  - If yes: Use ‘an’, e.g. *an elephant*
                  - If no:
                    - Use ‘a’, e.g. *a lion*

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