



## WHAT IS AN ARTICLE?

An article, in grammatical terms, is one of three words which comes before a noun. Its role is to indicate whether that noun is something specific and is already known by the listener/reader (definite), or whether it is something unknown or non-specific (indefinite).

These are the 3 articles:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the</li> </ul>	the <b>definite</b> article
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a</li> <li>• an</li> </ul>	the <b>indefinite</b> articles

In academic writing, it is sometimes difficult to know which article to use, or whether it is not necessary to use one at all ('zero article'). The following guide will help you with some general rules.

## THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

A noun is **definite** if it refers to something specific (either singular or plural) that is known to both the writer and the reader. The noun may be:

<b>something previously mentioned, or related to something previously mentioned</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I went to a lecture yesterday. <b>The</b> lecture was very interesting.</li> <li>• We went to a wedding on Saturday. <b>The</b> bride looked beautiful.</li> </ul>
<b>a superlative, or an ordinal number</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> second chapter of her book is the longest.</li> <li>• <b>The</b> best essays are those which are well structured.</li> </ul>
<b>the name of a river or a musical instrument. Some countries (mainly plural names) also take "the"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> Murray</li> <li>• I play <b>the</b> piano</li> <li>• <b>The</b> Philippines</li> </ul>
<b>an adjective used as a noun</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> French</li> <li>• <b>The</b> west</li> <li>• <b>The</b> rich</li> </ul>
<b>an organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> World Health Organisation</li> </ul>
<b>a class or category</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> Sturt desert pea is the floral emblem of South Australia.</li> </ul>
<b>modified by a relative clause, which may be shortened</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> subjects [who are] participating in our study agree to the guidelines.</li> <li>• <b>The</b> rats [which were] used in this experiment all survived. They will be <b>the</b> people [who] I need to learn from.</li> </ul>
<b>a unique person, place or thing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> earth revolves around <b>the</b> sun.</li> <li>• <b>The</b> queen of England</li> </ul>
<b>plural and preceded by "of"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None of <b>the</b> projects was satisfactory.</li> <li>• All of <b>the</b> questionnaires were returned.</li> </ul>
<b>a unique adjective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> same</li> <li>• <b>The</b> only</li> <li>• <b>The</b> principal</li> <li>• <b>The</b> whole</li> </ul> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 5px;"> <p><b>EXCEPTIONS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An only child (a child with no brothers or sisters)</li> <li>• A principal cause (there are several major causes)</li> </ul> </div>
<b>specific and followed by "of"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> use of this procedure was approved by <b>the</b> Experimental Ethics Committee of <b>the</b> University Central Hospital.</li> </ul>
<b>a decade or century</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> 1990s</li> <li>• <b>The</b> 15<sup>th</sup> century</li> </ul>
<b>a currency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The</b> dollar</li> <li>• <b>The</b> yen</li> </ul>



# ARTICLES



## THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE

The indefinite article can only be used for singular nouns. A noun is **indefinite** if it does not refer to something specific. “**A**” is used before a consonant sound (e.g. *a uniform*), and “**an**” is used before a vowel sound (e.g. *an hour*).

The indefinite article is used before:

<b>a singular noun which is mentioned for the first time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A</b> uniform is necessary if you are a school student.</li> <li>• This will make <b>a</b> difference.</li> </ul>
<b>a measurement, rate or expression of frequency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twice <b>a</b> day</li> <li>• Four times <b>an</b> hour</li> <li>• The seminar is <b>an</b> hour long.</li> <li>• The fees are \$600 <b>a</b> semester.</li> </ul>
<b>the first mention of something which is part of a whole</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A</b> piece of information.</li> <li>• <b>A</b> molecule of oxygen.</li> </ul>
<b>exclamations (where the noun is indefinite and singular)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “What <b>an</b> awful shock!”</li> <li>• “That’s <b>a</b> pity!”</li> </ul>
<b>what a thing or person is</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sun is <b>a</b> star.</li> <li>• I’m <b>an</b> engineer.</li> </ul>

## ZERO ARTICLE

We do **not** need an article when:

<b>a noun is plural and indefinite</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Women</b> generally live longer than <b>men</b>.</li> <li>• Long <b>reports</b> are difficult to write.</li> </ul>
<b>a noun is uncountable and indefinite</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The country’s major exports are <b>wool</b> and <b>oil</b>.</li> <li>• The river mouth is full of <b>mud</b> and <b>silt</b>.</li> </ul>
<b>another word, such as a personal pronoun, demonstrative adjective or quantifier, is used</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is <b>my</b> grandmother.</li> <li>• <b>These</b> countries can be seen as economically reliable.</li> <li>• <b>Several</b> answers may be given.</li> <li>• <b>Most</b> researchers agree on this point.</li> </ul>
<b>a noun which is mentioned for the first time is followed by a phrase which gives a description of a process, or alteration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>DNA that has been exposed to ultraviolet radiation</b> is sometimes unable to replicate.</li> <li>• <b>Animals that become infected with rabies</b> must be killed</li> </ul>
<b>a noun is a proper noun, name, place, country, day, festival or season.</b> (This is only a general rule, & there are many exceptions.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tom</li> <li>• Adelaide</li> <li>• Australia</li> <li>• Monday</li> <li>• Christmas</li> <li>• Summer</li> </ul>

## COUNTABLE & UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

English nouns are either **countable** or **uncountable**:

<b>A countable</b> noun can be made plural. It can take a definite or indefinite article.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one house/two houses</li> <li>• a house/the house/the houses</li> </ul>
An <b>uncountable</b> noun cannot be made plural. Uncountable nouns cannot take an indefinite article.	<p>For example, we cannot say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• two bacons</li> <li>• a furniture</li> </ul>
Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have a lot of experience [uncountable] in administration.</li> <li>• My experiences [countable] in the lab were very informative.</li> </ul>



Some uncountable nouns (such as money) may appear to be countable. These are called **mass nouns** and represent groups of countable nouns. (*Money*, for example, is the mass noun for individual nouns such as dollar or coin.)

You will need to decide if a noun is countable or uncountable before you can choose an appropriate article

**Uncountable** nouns can be grouped to make remembering them easier. For example:

#### GENERAL GROUPS WITH INDIVIDUAL PARTS

Mass Noun	Individual Parts (often countable)
Advice	<i>suggestions, recommendations...</i>
Equipment	<i>machines, computers, tools...</i>
Information	<i>facts, figures, statistics...</i>
News	<i>weather, sports, events...</i>
Work	<i>jobs, tasks, responsibilities...</i>
Art	<i>paintings, sculptures, drawings...</i>
Clothing	<i>shirts, dresses, socks, pants...</i>
Apparatus	<i>bunsen burner, test tube...</i>
Furniture	<i>sofas, chairs, tables...</i>
Grammar	<i>verb tense, word order...</i>
Homework	<i>exercises, assignments...</i>
Housework	<i>cleaning, cooking, shopping...</i>
Jewellery	<i>necklaces, rings, brooches...</i>
Luggage	<i>suitcases, bags...</i>
Mail	<i>letters, postcards, parcels...</i>
Money	<i>notes, coins, dollars, cents...</i>
Music	<i>songs, pieces, symphonies...</i>
Noise	<i>traffic noise, voices, sounds...</i>

#### THINGS THAT MUST BE IN CONTAINERS TO BE COUNTED

LIQUIDS	SOLIDS	GASES
• Water	• Toothpaste	• Air
• Milk	• Film	• Smoke
• Petrol	• Powder	• Steam
• Soup	• Salt	• Fog
• Wine	• Cement	• Oxygen
• Shampoo		• Pollution
• Oil		
• Blood		
• Coffee		

#### FOOD USUALLY CUT INTO PIECES

- Bread
- Cheese
- Meat
- Ice cream

#### THINGS WITH MANY PARTS

- Hair
- Grass
- Wheat
- Corn
- Dirt
- Dust
- Flour
- Salt

#### ABSTRACT IDEAS

- Love
- Beauty
- Anger
- Courage
- Fun
- Happiness
- Health
- Hate
- Honesty
- Intelligence
- Knowledge
- Luck
- Peace
- Poverty
- Progress
- Time
- Wealth
- Communication
- Justice
- Patience
- Trouble
- War

#### NATURAL CONDITIONS

- Wind
- Darkness
- Sunshine
- Electricity
- Gravity
- Weather
- Fire
- Heat
- Humidity
- Light

#### GERUNDS

- Walking
- Studying
- Researching

#### ACADEMIC SUBJECTS

- Biology
- Economics
- Literature
- Art
- Science
- Linguistics
- Mathematics
- Psychology
- Physics
- Music
- Poetry
- Chemistry

#### MATERIALS

- Gold
- Silver
- Cotton
- Plastic
- Paper
- Iron
- Rubber
- Wood
- Chalk

#### LANGUAGES

- Indonesian
- English
- Arabic
- Cantonese
- Mandarin



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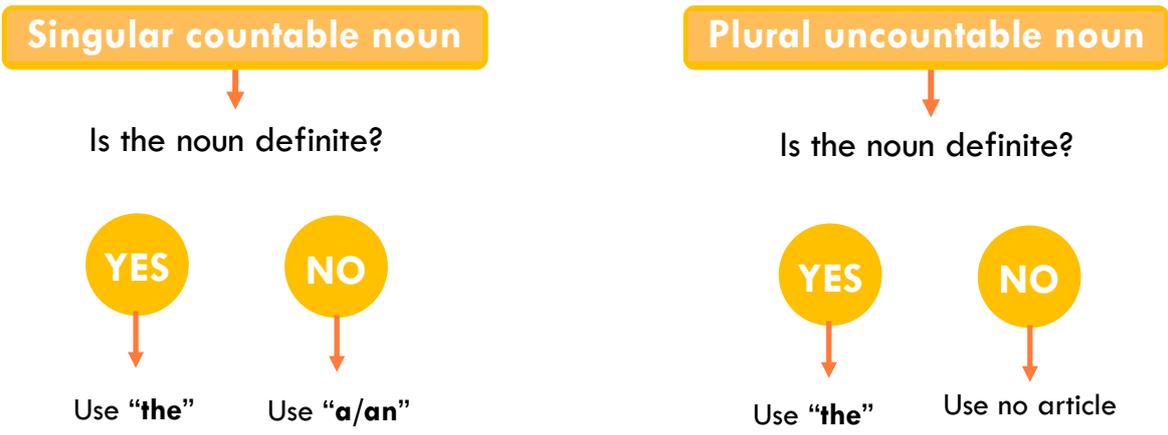


Words that have **different meanings** when used as **countable or uncountable** nouns:

UNCOUNTABLE	COUNTABLE	UNCOUNTABLE	COUNTABLE
Chicken (food)	One chicken/two chickens (animal)	Glass (the material)	A glass/glasses (drink holder)
Lamb (food)	One lamb/two lambs (animal)	Glasses (spectacles)	
Liver (food)	One liver/two livers (animal part)	Paper (the material)	A paper (newspaper or report)
Fish (food)	One fish/two fish (animal)	Iron (the material)	An iron/irons (for ironing of clothes)
Wine (general)	A wine/wines (means 'a kind of')	Wood (the material)	A wood/woods (place with trees)
Food (general)	A food/foods (means 'a kind of')	Fire (the condition)	A fire/fires (one specific occurrence)
Fruit (general)	A fruit/fruits (means 'a kind of')	Light (the condition)	A light/lights (produces light)
Meat (general)	A meat/meats (means 'a kind of')	Time (abstract idea)	A time/times (one specific period)
Education (general)	An education (means 'a kind of')	Cake (type of food)	A cake/cakes (specific occurrence)
Experience (general)	An experience/experiences (means 'a kind of')	Change (money)	A change/changes (alteration)
Company (visitors)	A company / companies (establishment or military unit)	Room (space)	A room/rooms (a partitioned area)
Business (occupation/interest)	A business/businesses (establishment)	Work (job/task)	A work/works (building under construction or artistic piece)

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT ARTICLE

Use the quick guide below to assist you in choosing the correct article



Much of the material in this sheet is adapted from:

Kohl, JR & Katz, S, Article usage, viewed 6 November 2013, [www2.estrellamountain.edu/faculty/stonebrink/SLO40/Articles\\_ESL.Pdf](http://www2.estrellamountain.edu/faculty/stonebrink/SLO40/Articles_ESL.Pdf); [www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/esl.html](http://www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/esl.html) (Please note that this text is no longer available )

Master, PA 1986, *Science, medicine and technology: English grammar and technical writing*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., New Jersey  
 Swales, JM & Feak, CB 1994, *Academic writing for graduate students*, 3rd edn, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.



## EXERCISES



Now try the following exercises. Use “a”, “an” or “the” where necessary.

**Remember**, sometimes more than one answer is possible, other times no article is required.

### EXERCISE 1

Egypt is (a) \_\_\_\_\_ model birthplace for (b) \_\_\_\_\_ major civilisation. If you were to head south into (c) \_\_\_\_\_ countryside from (d) \_\_\_\_\_ Cairo, (e) \_\_\_\_\_ modern capital of Egypt, you would soon be in (f) \_\_\_\_\_ narrow valley. You would soon see (g) \_\_\_\_\_ fields, vivid green with (h) \_\_\_\_\_ fine crops. You would also see (i) \_\_\_\_\_ vast expanse of dry, golden desert that borders this river valley.

(j) \_\_\_\_\_ Nile River makes this contrast possible. Without (k) \_\_\_\_\_ river, all would be desert. Every September, (l) \_\_\_\_\_ Nile floods, bringing (m) \_\_\_\_\_ huge amount of water that can be used for (n) \_\_\_\_\_ irrigation. Floods also make the soil richer by depositing (o) \_\_\_\_\_ mud and (p) \_\_\_\_\_ silt. These conditions have been the same for (q) \_\_\_\_\_ thousands of years. (r) \_\_\_\_\_ fertile soil allows for (s) \_\_\_\_\_ rich harvests.

### EXERCISE 2

(a) \_\_\_\_\_ library catalogue is (b) \_\_\_\_\_ key to (c) \_\_\_\_\_ library’s resources. It gives you (d) \_\_\_\_\_ information about materials held in (e) \_\_\_\_\_ library, and (f) \_\_\_\_\_ details you need to locate them. All (g) \_\_\_\_\_ Australian and New Zealand university libraries have online or computerised catalogues. Most libraries have their catalogue terminals scattered throughout (h) \_\_\_\_\_ building. This is (i) \_\_\_\_\_ distinct advantage over the old card catalogues, which could only be in one location. Moreover, in many cases you can connect to (j) \_\_\_\_\_ computer catalogue from home if you have (k) \_\_\_\_\_ personal computer and (l) \_\_\_\_\_ modem. However, (m) \_\_\_\_\_ card catalogue is not quite extinct; some academic libraries still retain one for details of older material. (n) \_\_\_\_\_ oldest books may be on (o) \_\_\_\_\_ separate record.



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## ANSWERS

Remember, sometimes two answers are possible

**EXERCISE 1**

(a) the singular, countable noun; unique – there can only be one birthplace  
 (b) a singular, countable; not specific; could be any civilisation  
 (c) the singular, uncountable noun; definite (this is the countryside near Cairo)  
 (d) - proper noun which needs no article  
 (e) the singular, countable noun; unique – there can only be one capital; specific and followed by 'or'  
 (f) a singular, countable noun; not mentioned previously  
 (g) - plural, countable noun; indefinite (we do not know which fields) needs no article  
 (h) the plural, countable noun; could be definite (the fields near Cairo)  
 (i) the singular, countable noun; definite (it borders this river valley)  
 (j) the name of river; defined as the Nile River  
 (k) the singular, countable noun; already identified  
 (l) the name of river  
 (m) a singular, countable noun; first mention of something that is part of a whole, needs no article  
 (n) - uncountable noun; not definite; general, needs no article  
 (o) - uncountable noun; not definite; general, needs no article  
 (p) - uncountable noun; not definite; general, needs no article  
 (q) - plural, countable noun; not definite; has a quantity word  
 (r) the singular uncountable noun; previously mentioned indirectly (mud and silt make the soil rich)  
 (s) - uncountable noun; general statement; needs no article

**EXERCISE 2**

Your answers to this exercise will vary according to whether you have interpreted the passage as referring to a non-specific library (any library anywhere) or a specific library (such as the one you are in)

(a) the singular, countable noun; definite and unique; a category  
 (b) the singular, countable noun; definite and unique  
 (c) a singular, countable noun; not definite (one of several keys)  
 (d) the singular, countable noun; the entire class of libraries  
 (e) - singular, countable noun; not definite; needs no article  
 (f) the singular, countable noun; already referred to in the passage  
 (g) a singular, countable noun; not definite (any library)  
 (h) the plural, countable noun; defined in the phrase (i.e. which details? The details you need...)  
 (i) - plural, countable noun; not definite or specific; needs no article  
 (j) the plural, countable noun (the libraries in Australia and New Zealand)  
 (k) the singular, countable noun; definite (refers to one library building)  
 (l) a singular, countable noun; indefinite (the library may have several buildings, but it's not important which one is referred to here)  
 (m) the singular, countable noun; not definite; not mentioned before  
 (n) a singular, countable noun (the advantage is distinct  
 (o) the singular, countable noun; already referred to in the passage  
 (p) a singular, countable noun (any catalogue)  
 (q) a singular, countable noun (could be any kind of PC)  
 (r) a singular, countable noun (could be any kind of modem)  
 (s) the singular, countable noun; acting as a whole category  
 (t) the singular, countable noun; definite; superlative  
 (u) the singular, countable noun; definite; superlative  
 (v) a singular, countable noun; not mentioned before