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:

- **the**
- **a**
- **an**

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:

- something previously mentioned, or related to something previously mentioned
  - I went to a lecture yesterday. **The** lecture was very interesting.
  - We went to a wedding on Saturday. **The** bride looked beautiful.

- a superlative, or an ordinal number
  - The second chapter of her book is the longest.
  - The best essays are those which are well structured.

- the name of a river or a musical instrument. Some countries (mainly plural names) also take "the"
  - The Murray
  - I play the piano
  - The Philippines

- an adjective used as a noun
  - The French
  - The west
  - The rich

- an organisation used as a noun
  - The World Health Organisation

- a class or category
  - The Sturt desert pea is the floral emblem of South Australia.

- modified by a relative clause, which may be shortened
  - The subjects [who are] participating in our study agree to the guidelines.
  - The rats [which were] used in this experiment all survived. They will be the people [who] I need to learn from.

- a unique person, place or thing
  - The earth revolves around **the** sun.
  - The queen of England

- plural and preceded by “of”
  - None of **the** projects was satisfactory.
  - All of **the** questionnaires were returned.

- a unique adjective
  - The **same**
  - The **only**
  - The **principal**
  - The **whole**

- specific and followed by “of”
  - The use of this procedure was approved by **the** Experimental Ethics Committee of the University Central Hospital.

- a decade or century
  - The 1990s
  - The 15th century

- a currency
  - The **dollar**
  - The **yen**

**EXCEPTIONS:**
- An only child (a child with no brothers or sisters)
- A principal cause (there are several major causes)
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:

| **a singular noun which is mentioned for the first time** | • A uniform is necessary if you are a school student.  
• This will make a difference. |
| **a measurement, rate or expression of frequency** | • Twice a day  
• Four times an hour  
• The seminar is an hour long.  
• The fees are $600 a semester. |
| **the first mention of something which is part of a whole** | • A piece of information.  
• A molecule of oxygen. |
| **exclamations (where the noun is indefinite and singular)** | • “What an awful shock!”  
• “That’s a pity!” |
| **what a thing or person is** | • The sun is a star.  
• I’m an engineer. |

ZERO ARTICLE

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

| **a noun is plural and indefinite** | • Women generally live longer than men.  
• Long reports are difficult to write. |
| **a noun is uncountable and indefinite** | • The country’s major exports are wool and oil.  
• The river mouth is full of mud and silt. |
| **another word, such as a personal pronoun, demonstrative adjective or quantifier, is used** | • She is my grandmother.  
• These countries can be seen as economically reliable.  
• Several answers may be given.  
• Most researchers agree on this point. |
| **a noun which is mentioned for the first time is followed by a phrase which gives a description of a process, or alteration** | • DNA that has been exposed to ultraviolet radiation is sometimes unable to replicate.  
• Animals that become infected with rabies must be killed |
| **a noun is a proper noun, name, place, country, day, festival or season.** (This is only a general rule, & there are many exceptions.) | • Tom  
• Adelaide  
• Australia  
• Monday  
• Christmas  
• Summer |

COUNTABLE & UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

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

A **countable** noun can be made plural. It can take a definite or indefinite article.

| • one house / two houses  
• a house / the house / the houses |

An **uncountable** noun cannot be made plural. Uncountable nouns cannot take an indefinite article.

For example, we cannot say:

| • two bacons  
• a furniture |

Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable

| • I have a lot of experience [uncountable] in administration.  
• My experiences [countable] in the lab were very informative. |
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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIQUIDS</th>
<th>SOLIDS</th>
<th>GASES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Toothpaste</td>
<td>Air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Smoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petrol</td>
<td>Powder</td>
<td>Steam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soup</td>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>Fog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>Cement</td>
<td>Oxygen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shampoo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 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

### 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

### NATURAL CONDITIONS

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

### GERUNDS

- Walking
- Studying
- Researching
## ARTICLES

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNCOUNTABLE</th>
<th>COUNTABLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicken (food)</td>
<td>One chicken/two chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(animal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb (food)</td>
<td>One lamb/two lambs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(animal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liver (food)</td>
<td>One liver/two livers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(animal part)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish (food)</td>
<td>One fish/two fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(animal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine (general)</td>
<td>A wine/wines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(means 'a kind of')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food (general)</td>
<td>A food/foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(means 'a kind of')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit (general)</td>
<td>A fruit/fruits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(means 'a kind of')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat (general)</td>
<td>A meat/meats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(means 'a kind of')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (general)</td>
<td>An education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(means 'a kind of')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience (general)</td>
<td>An experience/periences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(means 'a kind of')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company (visitors)</td>
<td>A company/companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(establishment or military unit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>A business/businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(occupation/interest)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(establishment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNCOUNTABLE</th>
<th>COUNTABLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glass (the material)</td>
<td>A glass/glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(drink holder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasses (spectacles)</td>
<td>A paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(newspaper or report)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper (the material)</td>
<td>A paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(newspaper or report)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron (the material)</td>
<td>An iron/irons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(for ironing of clothes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood (the material)</td>
<td>A wood/woods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(place with trees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire (the condition)</td>
<td>A fire/fires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(one specific occurrence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light (the condition)</td>
<td>A light/lights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(produces light)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time (abstract idea)</td>
<td>A time/times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(one specific period)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cake (type of food)</td>
<td>A cake/cakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(specific occurrence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change (money)</td>
<td>A change/changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(alteration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room (space)</td>
<td>A room/rooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a partitioned area)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work (job/task)</td>
<td>A work/works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(building under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or artistic piece)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT ARTICLE

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

- **Singular countable noun**
  - Is the noun definite?
  - **YES**: Use “the”
  - **NO**: Use “a/an”

- **Plural uncountable noun**
  - Is the noun definite?
  - **YES**: Use “the”
  - **NO**: Use no article

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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)
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 (a) _______ 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 (a) _______ separate record.
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 ‘of’

(f) a singular, countable noun; not definite; not mentioned before

(g) - plural, countable noun; indefinite (we do not know which fields) needs no article

(h) - plural, countable noun; not specific or previously mentioned (crops are general) needs no article

(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

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 (we don’t know which library and it doesn’t matter)

(d) - singular, countable noun; not definite, needs no article

(e) the singular, countable noun; already referred to in the passage

(f) the plural, countable noun; defined in the phrase (i.e. which details? The details you need…)

(g) - plural, countable noun; not definite or specific, needs no article

(h) the singular, countable noun; definite (refers to one library building)

(i) a singular, countable noun; indefinite (the library may have several buildings, but it’s not important which)

(j) the singular, countable noun; already referred to in the passage

(k) a singular, countable noun (could be any kind of PC)

(l) a singular, countable noun (could be any kind of modem)