



ARTICLES



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

something previously mentioned, or related to something previously mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Murray • I play the piano • The Philippines
an adjective used as a noun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The French • The west • The rich
an organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The World Health Organisation
a class or category	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Sturt desert pea is the floral emblem of South Australia.
modified by a relative clause, which may be shortened	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The earth revolves around the sun. • The queen of England
plural and preceded by "of"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None of the projects was satisfactory. • All of the questionnaires were returned.
a unique adjective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same • The only • The principal • The whole <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 5px;"> <p>EXCEPTIONS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An only child (a child with no brothers or sisters) • A principal cause (there are several major causes) </div>
specific and followed by "of"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of this procedure was approved by the Experimental Ethics Committee of the University Central Hospital.
a decade or century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 1990s • The 15th century
a currency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dollar • The yen



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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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A uniform is necessary if you are a school student. • This will make a difference.
a measurement, rate or expression of frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A piece of information. • A molecule of oxygen.
exclamations (where the noun is indefinite and singular)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What an awful shock!” • “That’s a pity!”
what a thing or person is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sun is a star. • I’m an engineer.

ZERO ARTICLE

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

a noun is plural and indefinite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women generally live longer than men. • Long reports are difficult to write.
a noun is uncountable and indefinite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one house/two houses • a house/the house/the houses
An uncountable 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"> • two bacons • a furniture
Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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

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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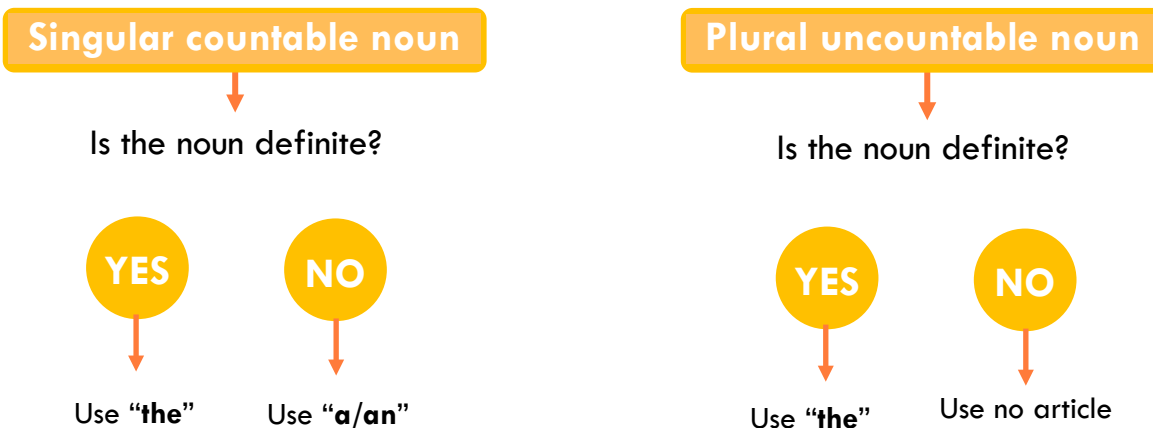


Words that have **different meanings** when used as **countable or uncountable** nouns:

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

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; 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 plural, countable noun; not specific or previously mentioned (crops are general) needs no article
 (j) the name of river; definite (it borders this river valley)
 (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 plural, 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) a singular, countable noun; not definite; not mentioned before
 (n) the 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