Grammar: Using articles

Articles are used to indicate whether a noun refers to a specific or a general item. The rules for using articles in English are quite complex, so for students whose first language is not English, when to use an article, and which article to use can cause problems. This fact sheet will not attempt to cover all the rules, but will just provide some of the basic rules for use on:

1. What is an article?
2. Some basic rules for using articles

> GRAMMAR CHECKERS do not flag missing articles or their incorrect use in your writing with any degree of consistency. You will need to understand the basic principles of using articles and check your writing yourself to ensure that articles are used correctly.

1.   What is an article?

There are two types of articles, **definite** and **indefinite**. However, in your choice about whether to use an article, or which one to use, you have four possible choices: **the, a, an, or no article.**

- 'the' is known as the DEFINITE ARTICLE
- 'a' and 'an' are INDEFINITE ARTICLES
- no article is sometimes referred to as ZERO ARTICLE

> **NOTE:** APA referencing style is used in used in this fact sheet.

AN EXAMPLE OF ARTICLES IN TEXT

In **the** twenty-first century, **a** number of undesirable practices have emerged as mobile phone usage spreads into everyday life. In **the** workplace, employers report that many members of their staff use **an** individually-owned mobile phone to socialise during work hours, resulting in loss of productive work time and effort (Jackson, 1998; James, 2004; Peters, 2005). In social settings, people comment that they are irritated by **the** intrusion of mobile phone conversations in restaurants, theatres and other public venues. Waters (2010) observes that:

> One sits in **a** restaurant, **a** lecture or just in **a** quiet public place. Suddenly, loud ringing or musical chimes interfere with **the** social situation or peaceful setting. This is followed by **a** loud personal conversation. Surely, there needs to be **a** social code of behaviour for mobile phone usage that needs to be observed. (para. 10)

Another worrying trend is that face-to-face social interaction seems to have been taken over by **the** tools of **the** mobile phone. For example, **an** analysis of **a** survey of 2000 teenagers reveals that 93 percent of today's youth terminate relationships by voicemail or text messages rather than negotiate meaningful relationships (Jackson & Peters, 2009, p. 36). Therefore, it is important that our society develops some social standards to monitor **the** use of mobile phones in our every-day life.

NOW TRY THIS EXERCISE ON CHOOSING THE CORRECT ARTICLE

> Write the definite article **_the_**, the indefinite article **_a / an_** OR if zero article is needed write **_N_**

¹__ Communication is ²__ activity in which ³__ information is transferred from ⁴__ sender to ⁵__ receiver via ⁶__ medium. ⁷__ Technology has greatly revolutionised ⁸__ communication process. For example, ⁹__ computer and ¹⁰__ Internet allow for ¹¹__ instant response over ¹²__ great distances.

> **ANSWERS**
>
> **1.** N, **2.** an, **3.** N, **4.** a, **5.** a, **6.** a, **7.** N, **8.** the, **9.** the, **10.** the, **11.** an, **12.** N

2. Some basic rules for using articles

The first thing you need to decide is whether the noun is countable or uncountable

Countable nouns in English are usually those that can take a plural form (e.g. lecture, lectures, essay, essays, student, students).

Uncountable nouns in English usually do not have a plural form. They include names for languages, subjects (biology, economics, history), solids (iron, coal), liquids (water, oil), gases (oxygen, hydrogen), powders (sugar, flour). However, some nouns can be both countable and uncountable, depending on the context or meaning. This group includes words like paper, discipline, space. If you are unsure, most learner dictionaries (e.g. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*) will indicate whether a noun is countable or uncountable.

Rules for using the indefinite article (a/an)

1. The indefinite article **(a, an)** cannot be used with uncountable nouns or with plural nouns.
2. Use **'an'** if the word immediately after the article begins with a, e, i, o or u, except where the 'u' is pronounced like a 'y' (e.g. an apple, an egg, an interesting result, an odd couple, an umbrella, BUT a university).
3. Use **a, an** when you first mention a singular countable noun.
4. Use **zero article** when you first mention a plural noun or an uncountable noun.

The definite article (the) can be used for specific references to countable nouns

---

Rules for using the definite article (the)

1. Use **'the'** for the second and subsequent references to an item. The item could be explicity referred to, or implied (e.g. **The** committee has approved a new policy. **The** policy...) (A survey was administered to.... **The** results showed that ...)
2. Use **'the'** when you use 'most' as the superlative form (e.g. **The** most critical step is...)
3. Use **'the'** when using ordinal forms to show order or number (e.g. **The** first students to graduate were...; **The** last students to leave...)
4. Use **'the'** when using words that specify a particular item (e.g. **The** same student, **the** only essay, **the** principal reason)
5. Use **'the'** for reference to an item that is understood by all speakers (the sun, the planets, the moon, the stars)

The examples above refer to specific, real items. You may also need to refer more generally to an entire class of things, or to a representative of that class.

Rules for using articles (a/an, the, zero article) for classes of things

1. Use the definite article **(the)** to refer to an entire class of things (e.g. **The** mobile phone has revolutionised communications.)
2. Use the indefinite article **(a/an)** with a singular countable noun to refer to a representative of the class of things (e.g. A mobile phone is a prime example of how technology has shaped our lives.)
3. Use **zero article** with plural countable nouns and with uncountable nouns to refer to a representative of the class of things (e.g. Mobile phones have revolutionised . . . ;Technology is revolutionising the way people communicate.)