Grammar: Using Articles

Articles are used with nouns to indicate whether the 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 be difficult. This factsheet will not attempt to cover all the rules but will provide some of the basic rules for using articles.

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

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, for zero article write N

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<td>Communication is __ activity in which __ information is transferred from __ sender to __ receiver via __ medium. __ Technology has greatly revolutionised __ communication process. For example, __ computer and __ internet allow for __ instant response over __ great distances.</td>
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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), and 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)

The indefinite article (a, an) cannot be used with uncountable nouns or with plural nouns. 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).

Use a, an when you first mention a singular countable noun.
Use zero article when you first mention a plural noun or an uncountable noun.

Rules for using the definite article (the)

Use ‘the’ for the second and subsequent general references to an item that has been described in more detail at first mention. The item could be explicitly referred to or implied (e.g., The committee has approved a new policy. The policy...) (A survey was administered to.... The results showed that ... )

Use ‘the’ when you use ‘most’ as the superlative form (e.g., The most critical step is...)

Use ‘the’ when using ordinal forms to show order or number (e.g., The first students to graduate were...; The last students to leave...)

Use ‘the’ when using words that specify a particular item (e.g., The same student, the only essay, the principal reason)

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

Use the definite article (the) to refer to an entire class of things (e.g., The mobile phone has revolutionised communications.)

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.)

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.)