Articles – a/an/the/zero article

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Re-visit
Articles are those small words *a*, *an* and *the*, that often appear before nouns in the English language. Please remember that all nouns in the English language have articles. Sometimes, it is a ‘zero’ article which we cannot see, but it is there! Nouns do not always follow the articles immediately; numerals and adjectives can be used between articles and nouns.

Here is a tutor at work in a tutorial room. The tutor has an idea about how to help students write an assignment. The 20 tired students in the tutorial room have been trying to write the assignment all morning. The assignment is about the diagnostic test results.

Please note how the articles in the story change from being indefinite (non-specific) to definite (specific) as the reader becomes more familiar with each topic.
Articles are used to modify a noun.

There are **two types of articles: ‘definite’ and ‘indefinite’**. The definite article is used when we are being specific and the indefinite article is used when we are being non-specific.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The = definite article</th>
<th>‘a’ or ‘an’ = indefinite article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the (can be used with both singular and plural forms)</td>
<td>‘a’ or ‘an’ (= one, only used with singular nouns) - depending on the first sound of the noun. It is not always the same as the first letter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The teacher demonstrated several cards to the students.**

The article ‘a’ is used before singular nouns (or phrases) that start with consonants: BCDFGHJKLMNPQRSTVWXYZ

* a student
* a memorable experience

The article ‘an’ is used before singular countable nouns (or phrases) that begin with vowel sounds: A E I O U

* an experience
* an automatic tool
* an honours student (silent ‘h’)

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Three ways articles can be used

Articles can be used when referring to something in a general, non-specific (indefinite) or specific (definite) way.

- **General**
  - Referring to a noun in a general way; making generalisations
  
- **Non-specific**
  - Referring to one of many items
  - OR introducing a noun for the first time

- **Specific**
  - Referring to a specific item
  - OR mentioning the item for a second time

**A computer** is very useful for study.

**Go and use a computer.**

**The computer** you gave me has a cracked screen.
How articles are used with singular countable* and uncountable** nouns

**Singular Noun**

- **Countable**
  - Non-specific – *a/an*
  - **Specific – *the***

- **Uncountable**
  - **Specific – *the***
  - **Zero article (no article)**

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- A study on student motivation found…
- *A study = 1 study*
- It is important to discuss *the* study mentioned above.
- One specific study
- The research is important.
- A specific research project that is known to both speaker and listener.
- Research is important for universities.
- Research in general

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* Countable nouns can be counted (*1 unit – 4 units*).
** Uncountable nouns do not have a plural form (*advice, information, knowledge, money, music, news, power, etc.*).
How articles are used with plural countable nouns

Non-specific – zero article

*Several studies* on student motivation found…

Specific - the

*It is important to discuss the* studies conducted by young researchers in Australian settings.
Quick tips
**Quick tips**

| Remember that all nouns in the English language have articles. The article can be **a/an/the** or the ‘zero’ article - you have to make an informed choice. | Pay attention to how articles are used in your readings. | When checking a noun in a dictionary, pay attention to whether the noun is countable or uncountable and which articles are used in examples. |
Useful links on articles, common errors and more:

- Englishpage.com
- Edufind.com – English Grammar Guide
- Englisch-hilfen.de
- Griffith University – Help Yourself
- Monash University, Language and Learning, Engineering Grammar: articles.
- Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL):

Face-to-face support
Who can help with English at Monash?

English Connect – conversational circles, peer feedback on your writing and grammar workshops
Resources – grammar books


