

Articles for common nouns

If you have problems deciding on **a**, **an**, **the**, or **no article** at all, look at each troublesome noun phrase and ask the following questions:

Is it clear to the reader what actual thing or concept the writer is referring to?

NO YES

Use **the**.

i. **Second mention – the noun is specific because the writer has already mentioned the noun in the text.**

*Recent studies on the sites of absorption of magnesium within the gut of ruminants have given a scientific basis for a simple model. **The** model is not dependent on the actual site...*

ii. **Using an adjective before or after the noun**

Naming - a specific theory, effect, device, scale etc modified by a proper name used as an adjective

***The** EEO programme consists of concrete actions to identify and eliminate barriers to equality in employment policies.*

Phrase – A modifying word/phrase/clause follows the noun

***The** applicant who passes the initial screening, application form, and required tests is typically given a comprehensive interview.*

Superlative/ranking adjectives – always use **the**

***The** most-controlled therapy yielded the best results.*

Specifier – adjectives giving specific meaning to the noun e.g. same, sole, only, chief, principle

***The** same subjects were retested at two-week intervals.*

iii. **Shared knowledge or unique reference**

***The** sun rises in the east and sets in the west.*

Is the writer making a generalization or referring to a nonspecific thing or concept, and is it **countable**?

NO YES

Use **a, the,**
or **no**
article.

i. **Generalization using a singular countable noun**

***A** mission statement is a statement of the organization's purpose – it wants to accomplish in the larger environment.*

ii. **Generalization using plural countable noun**

***Groups** form because of managerial action, and also because of individual efforts.*

iii. **Generalization referring to a group or class of thing**

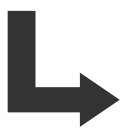
***The** leopard is famous for speed and stealth.*

(Other options: **A** leopard/**Leopards** can also be used)

PTO

Is the writer making a generalization or referring to a nonspecific thing or concept, and is it **uncountable** in the sentence?

YES



Use **no article** (Ø).
(A quantity word or phrase such as *some, a little, or a great deal of* is possible.)

Leisure defined as a state of existence may also be tied to religious celebration.

(Based on a model from Raimes, A. (2004). *Grammar troublespots: A guide for student writers*. Cambridge: CUP.)

More tips on using articles

Other languages do not use articles the way English does. Although there are rules to help you, there are also lots of exceptions and fine distinctions to be made, so learning to use articles accurately takes time. To really master article usage, you need to read widely, noticing how they are used.

- ✓ **Tip:** Every definite noun takes **the** regardless of whether it is singular, plural or uncountable, so check if the noun is definite (known to the writer and reader).
- ✓ **Tip:** Use **an** before a word beginning with a vowel sound
- ✓ **Tip:** Check all singular countable nouns have **a, an, the**
- ✓ **Tip:** **A** and **an** are derived from the word 'one', so it is illogical to use them with a plural noun.
- ✓ **Tip:** When a proper name is used in possessive form, no article (Ø) is used. (e.g. *Einstein's theory of relativity*)

More resources

If you would like to know more about how to using articles, or to brush up on other aspects of grammar,

- check out our resources on [Writing clearly and logically](#) and [Polishing your writing](#).
- or talk to one of the Learning Advisors in Academic Success (academicsuccess@lincoln.ac.nz)