

Articles

Articles in English are words like 'a', 'an', 'the'. The correct use of articles is very difficult for ESL learners. This is partly because there are many rules governing the use of articles, and because there are many instances where the use of articles does not seem to follow any clear rules.

The following sections set out SOME of the most common rules for the use of articles in English. Given the frequent use of general statements in academic writing, the last section sets out the 3 most common alternatives for the use of articles in general statements.

Some rules about when to use and not to use articles

1. When you should use an indefinite article (a/an):

The article 'a/an' is called an 'indefinite article' because it is used with nouns that are not yet specific (i.e. not definite) to the reader/listener. 'A/an' has a similar meaning to 'one'. Therefore we can use it only with a singular noun that is countable.

Example: I have read *a* book on this topic. In this example, the reader/listener does not know yet which book is referred to.

2. When you should use the definite article (the):

The definite article 'the' implies that the speaker/listener (or writer/ reader) knows which noun is referred to. This may be because:

(i) The noun has been mentioned before, e.g. in the previous sentence.

Example: A common custom in some societies is to have *an* initiation ceremony. *The* initiation ceremony marks entry into the society.

(ii) There is a word, phrase or clause that comes before or after the noun that makes it specific:

Example: *The* figures for this quarter are above average.

The Heisenberg uncertainty principle also applies in economics.



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(iii) The noun is preceded by a sequence marker (e.g. 'first') or is unique (e.g. 'perfect'):

Example: *The perfect* essay does not exist.

The first step is always the most difficult.

(iv) The noun is definite because of shared knowledge. For example, if the writer has written 'the government' – this means the writer assumes that the reader will know that the reference here is to a particular government (e.g. the government of Australia)

Unlike the indefinite article, the definite article can also be used with plural nouns, or with uncountable nouns.

Example: *The* books on this topic are in your reading guide.

3. When can you omit an article (∅ = zero article)?

We generally do not use articles:

- with proper names (e.g. Tom, Dr Smith)
- together with another pronoun or determiner (my, this, every)
- when using plural or uncountable nouns in making general statements (see section (iii) below)

4. Making general statements

There are a number of ways of making general (generic) statements in English. When using countable nouns, the three most common ways are:

(i) The + singular noun

Example: *The computer* is a remarkable machine.

This is used in fairly formal and technical writing when referring to people, plants, complex inventions and devices. The noun here is used in a fairly abstract sense, referring to the entire class of objects/concepts.

(ii) A + singular noun

Example: *A computer* is a remarkable machine.

This is used as a more concrete, informal way of expressing generalizations. The noun is used as a representative of that class of nouns, rather than a particular individual member of that class.

(iii) ∅ + plural noun

Example: *Computers* are remarkable machines

Note: Uncountable/abstract nouns can also be used to make general statements. Use the noun without an article in such cases:

Example: Life is difficult.

Water is essential for survival.

The most common errors in article use are:

1. Using the wrong article (e.g. 'a' instead of 'the')
2. Leaving out an article
3. Using an article when there is no need to use one.

The following are examples of these common errors from the work of some students. The correct form and an explanation are also provided.

Examples of common errors	Correct version and explanations
This paper will examine an evidence in support of the above argument.	<p><i>This paper will examine the evidence in support of the above argument.</i></p> <p>The word 'evidence' is uncountable so we can't have 'a evidence'. It is also quite definite in this sentence because the phrase 'in support of ...', identifies the evidence being discussed</p>
This issue was addressed by spelling reform of 1972.	<p><i>This issue was addressed by the spelling reform of 1972.</i></p> <p>The definite article is needed here because 'the reform' is quite specific: It is the spelling reform that took place in 1972.</p>
He quoted from report of recent investigation.	<p><i>He quoted from a report of a recent investigation into criminal behaviour in mental institutions.</i></p> <p>The indefinite article is needed in this sentence in both places. The words 'report' and 'investigation' are not specific here. That is, we don't know which report or which investigation the writer is referring to.</p>
	<p><i>He quoted from the report of the recent investigation into criminal behaviour in mental institutions.</i></p> <p>The definite article is needed here because the writer is referring to the single report of a specific investigation. (This may have been published by the people or institution who carried it out).</p>
	<p><i>He quoted from a report of the recent investigation into criminal behaviour in mental institutions.</i></p> <p>Here the writer is referring to one particular investigation, but we don't know which report is being referred to.</p>
The defamation laws aim to protect an individual's reputation.	<p><i>∅ Defamation laws aim to protect an individual's reputation.</i></p> <p>This can be a general statement (depends on context) and the noun 'laws' is plural. Thus there is no need for the definite article here.</p>

Strategies to determine appropriate article

Underline the nouns in your text and check whether they need an article. You could ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it singular or plural?

⇒ If plural, then you may need either 'the' or no articles (∅).

- Is it countable or uncountable?

⇒ If uncountable, then you may need either 'the' or no articles (∅).

- Is it definite or indefinite?

⇒ If definite then you may need 'the'.

- Am I making a general statement here?

⇒ Look at the options for making general statements. If unsure, the safest strategy may be to use a plural noun with no article. (∅)

Useful references on the use of articles

Swan, M. (1994). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Masters, P. A. (1986). *Science, medicine, and technology: English grammar and technical writing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslart.html>