Articles

In general, articles are used before nouns to show whether you are referring to a specific thing, group, or situation or a general concept or category. *The* is a definite article whereas *a* or *an* are indefinite articles.

Examples:

- Students often have reading lists.
- First-year students are sent a reading list for each subject.
- The students enrolled in the thermodynamics course were sent *the* reading list before the start of term.

General rules:

Use no article to refer to any and all examples of a general group or category.

- *Dogs* bark.

Use *a*/*an* to refer to an example of a specified group or type.

- *A* dog is barking.

Use *the* to specify a particular known thing or group.

- *The* annoying dog over there is barking.

The vs. *a*/*an* (definite articles vs. indefinite articles):

Use *the* to refer to a whole class or species.

- *The* African elephant has larger ears than the *Indian* elephant.
- *The* homeless are most vulnerable to this disease.

We sometimes use *the* + adjective to refer to a group: the homeless, the elderly, the disabled.

Use *a*/*an* to refer to any example of a class or species.

- *A* nurse practitioner must attend university longer than a registered nurse.
- Migration may result in the generations of a *family* living in different places.

When moving from unspecified to specified:

Use *a*/*an* when mentioning something for the first time in a text, and use *the* when something is already known to the reader.

- Researchers at TUM conducted a survey into student attitudes towards recycling.
- More than 2,000 students participated in the survey. (*= the survey that has already been mentioned*)
- The US Geological survey recorded an active volcano in Hawaii.
- *The* volcano erupted at 18:41 local time. (*= the volcano that has already been mentioned*)
Plural countable nouns:
Plural countable nouns are used either with the or no article. In academic writing, we often use a plural noun with no article to refer to a general group or category.

- Cell phones have changed the world fundamentally in many ways.
- Per capita, people in developing countries produce less waste than in developed countries.

We need the before a plural noun that refers to a specific group.

- A virus damaged data stored on the company’s phones.
- About 40% of the people affected by this condition are men.

Uncountable and abstract nouns:
We often use uncountable and abstract nouns with no article to refer to a general category, process, or concept.

- New technology has changed the world in many ways.
- Streamlining the ordering process can often increase efficiency.

Uncountable and abstract nouns are sometimes used with the to refer to a specific example or situation.

- The new technology reduced preparation time by 50 percent.
- The reorganization of the system greatly increased the efficiency of the ordering process.