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.*