



Articles (the, a, an) are the small words often used before nouns or noun groups. Articles show whether you are writing about things that are known to both the writer and reader (definite), or things that are not known to them both (indefinite). Articles can also show whether you are talking about things in general or particular things. There are two articles: the (the definite article) and a/an (the indefinite article). Every time you use a noun, you have to decide if you are going to use an article, and if so, which one. Your choice is determined by the noun or noun group.

Grammatical feature	What you need to know
1. Noun and noun groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nouns are naming words; the thing doing the action of the sentence or the thing it is being done to. For instance: The cat sat on the mat. The nouns are cat and mat. ▪ The article comes before the noun or before the words describing the noun (a noun group). In the sentence below the noun group is brown fat cat: The brown fat cat sat on the mat. se quotation marks (inverted commas '...' or "...") to separate another person's spoken or written words from the rest of the sentence.
2. Definite article: The	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ask yourself: Does my reader know which specific thing I mean or is it new? ▪ <i>The</i> is used to refer to something that is known to you and your reader. <i>The</i> cat refers to a specific individual cat and both you and your reader know which cat you are referring to. You can also use <i>the</i> for a noun you have described or are just about to. In either case your reader knows which specific thing you are referring to. ▪ <i>The</i> is used for expressions that refer to our physical environment or other common features of our lives: the country, the sea, the future, the universe, the weather etc. For example: I love <i>the</i> sea. ▪ <i>The</i> is used with superlatives because there is usually only one of the best, biggest, etc. For example: I'm <i>the</i> oldest in my family. ▪ You can replace an article of a single or countable noun with another determiner: <i>her</i> brother instead of <i>the</i> brother.
3. Indefinite article: A/an	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>A</i> and <i>an</i> are two forms of the same word. The indefinite article is used with single nouns to introduce something your reader is unaware of. For instance, <i>a</i> cat, indicates that this is a new cat your reader has not encountered before. ▪ Choosing <i>A</i> or <i>An</i>: Usually you put 'a' in front of nouns starting with a consonant and 'an' in front of nouns starting with a vowel. This is not determined by how you spell the word, but rather how you pronounce the word. For instance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an umbrella (pronounced as a u) • a union (pronounced as a y) • an hour (pronounce without the h) • a horse (pronounced with the h) ▪ <i>A/an</i> cannot be used with an adjective alone (without a noun). It's <i>a</i> good car. OR It's good. ▪ <i>A/an</i> is always used after negative expressions (I haven't got <i>a</i> car),



Grammatical feature	What you need to know
	prepositions (Don't go out without <i>a</i> hat), or after fractions (half <i>an</i> hour, <i>a</i> quarter of a kilo)
4. Some/any	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Before plural and uncountable nouns, we normally express similar meanings with some/any or no article:<ul style="list-style-type: none">We met <i>some</i> American students at university. (Plural noun)I don't have <i>any</i> money. (Uncountable noun)
5. No article	<ul style="list-style-type: none">You can in some circumstances leave out the article the before plural nouns (cats: John doesn't like cats in the house) or general uncountable nouns (happiness: Happiness is more important than money).No article is used to talk about things in general: Books are heavy.No article is used with singular proper names: Sally lives in Australia.
6. Rules and exceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Like so many things in English, there are rules for using articles, but also exceptions and complications for every rule. For instance, you would put '<i>the</i>' in front of a river name, but not a city name. Practical English Usage by Michael Swan is a handy reference and there is a copy in the library's reference section (call number 428.24 SWA).

Useful links:

For more information on use of articles with nouns, refer to our [Nouns](#) sheet.

- Purdue University's [Online Writing Lab](#)
 - [Articles: A vs An](#)
 - [How to use articles](#)

References:

- Parrott, M. (2012). Grammar for English language teachers. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Swan, M. (2009). Practical English usage. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.