

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

English uses articles to provide information about a noun, whether it is **generic**, **indefinite** or **definite**.

Choosing the appropriate article can be confusing and difficult, especially for those language learners whose native languages do not differentiate between definite and indefinite articles.

These notes cover most of the difficult situations.

STUDY TIPS

To remind you when to use *the* or *a/an*, remember that *the* belongs to the group of “th” words – this/these, that/those – and refers to a particular or definite person, place or thing.

a/an belongs to the words meaning “one” and means an example of one of something.

In English there are two types of articles - **indefinite** and **definite**.

Indefinite:

a, an

a – used with words and abbreviations that begin with a consonant, for example *a pear*, *a DVD*

an – used with words and abbreviations that begin with a vowel, for example *an apple*, *an ATM*

Definite:

the

No article required: no article (Ø).

Generic nouns and articles: a, an or no article (Ø).

A **generic noun** is used for a non-specific reference, making a generalization about a whole group of people, objects, places or things. It is a kind of symbol that represents all or any member of an entire group.

USE

Nouns	Singular	Plural
countable	<p>a, an</p> <p>A chocolate is sweet and hard.</p> <p>Meaning: not one actual chocolate but <i>any</i> one chocolate that represents all others</p>	<p>no article (Ø)</p> <p>Chocolates are delicious.</p> <p>Meaning: <i>all</i> chocolates are delicious</p>
	<p>Ø</p> <p>Chocolate is a nice desert.</p> <p>Meaning: <i>all</i> chocolate, generally</p>	

Indefinite nouns and articles: a and an

An indefinite noun is used to name real people, places or things, but the reference is unspecified. Indefinite articles are used with singular countable nouns.

SINGULAR COUNTABLE NOUNS	
Use	EXAMPLE
1. to introduce an unknown person, place or thing into the text for the first time	I bought a paper from the newsagent on the corner. It had an article about the drought.
2. when the person or thing does not refer to someone or something specifically	He took a notebook to class.
3. when making reference to a person's job or a member of a group	He is a teacher. She is an Australian.
4. when giving a definition	The shark is a carnivorous animal.
5. in set phrases: a few, a little, a bottle of, a kilo, a dozen, a lot of etc.	Only a few students attended the workshop on the weekend.

Definite nouns and articles: the

A definite noun is used when naming a person, place or thing specifically.

DEFINITE NOUNS: THE	
Use	EXAMPLE
1. when the reference to the person or thing is known	The teacher marked our essays in class. Part time English students are entitled to use the library facilities.
2. when it refers to something unique	The sun was bright and almost orange.
3. when the noun has been referred to before	They chose a school close to the city. The school has an excellent reputation.
4. when referring to someone's job title	the chief executive officer
5. with a superlative adjective	Susan got the highest mark in the listening test.
6. with time periods	the twenty-first century, the winter, the spring, in the morning, the future
7. with proper nouns that have an of phrase	the University of Technology
8. with some geographic names, specifically referring to a group	the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, the Himalayas
9. with names of oceans, seas and rivers	the Nile, the Yangtze, the Atlantic (Ocean), the Red Sea
10. with regions	the West, the South Pole, the Equator
11. with names of government departments, organisations	the Department of Foreign Affairs, the United Nations
12. with adjectives naming the nationality of a people	the Australians, the Thais

