

## Using Articles (*a/an/the*) – The Basics

Here you can learn the basics of

- **using *a/an* or *the* in scientific writing.**

This information sheet is linked to Information Sheet 2a: *Using Articles - Exceptions When Using “the”*. An associated worksheet is also available.

### General Information

*A/an* and *the* are called articles and are a signal that a noun is about to appear. Using them is related to whether the noun is already known to the reader and whether the noun is countable or not. When you write a noun, you should ask yourself the following questions

1. Am I referring to a specific example of the noun?

If YES: Use *the*. Specific examples occur, e.g., when you have already referred to that noun in your text or when there is common agreement on what you are referring to, e.g., *the sun* (the one most people refer to when writing about the sun – the one visible from the earth).

If NO, i.e., you are only referring to the noun generally, ask

2. Is the noun countable, e.g., *dog* or uncountable, e.g., *advice* and is it singular or plural?

If the noun is countable and singular, use *a/an*, e.g., *a dog*, *an example*. If the noun is uncountable, e.g., *information*, or plural, e.g., *dogs*, don't use any article. You can often identify a countable noun by whether there is a special plural form (e.g., *sheep*) or the plural is formed by adding an *s* (e.g., *dogs*)

There are numerous exceptions to using *the*. Only the most important ones are covered here. For more detailed information, see the Useful Resources on this information sheet or Information Sheet 2a: *Using Articles – Exceptions When Using “the”*.



### A/an

Use *a/an*

- before singular countable nouns whose identity is not known to the reader, i.e., when you are introducing something new/unfamiliar to the reader, e.g., *A recent paper on ...*

Whether to use *a* or *an* will depend on whether the first letter of the following word sounds like a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) – use *an* – or not – use *a*. That letter does not necessarily have to be a vowel. For example, you would write *a European* because, although the word *European* starts with an *E*, that *E* is actually pronounced as a yù - a non-vowel sound. Conversely, you would write *an hour*, *an MP* because the *h* in *hour* is not pronounced and the *M* in *MP* is pronounced as an *em*.

### The

Use *the* to indicate to the reader that they know or soon will know the noun you are referring to:

- before most nouns whose identity is known to the reader, e.g., you have already mentioned that object or there is commonly only one object of interest, e.g., *the sun*.
- when the phrase you are describing has an “*of*” in it, e.g., *the results of this research*
- when you want to indicate that what you are referring to is generally true for all of that category, e.g., *in the family* (generally all families – *in families* would therefore also be acceptable.)
- when a following phrase makes the exact meaning of the noun clear, e.g., *The recent paper by Smith and Jones ...*

Do not use *the*

- with plural uncountable nouns that mean *all* or *in general*, e.g., *mountains* (in general).
- with most singular proper nouns (the nouns written in English in capital letters). Exceptions to this rule are available in Information Sheet 2a: Using Articles – Exceptions when using “the”.

### Useful Resources

Beckwith, S. 2013. ‘A’ and ‘The’ Explained. *A learner’s guide to definite and indefinite articles*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Parrot, M. 2000. *Grammar for English Language Teachers*. Cambridge, CUP.

Swan, M. 2009. *Practical English Usage*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford, OUP.

