

Articles - Basics

It is not easy to know when to use 'a' or 'the' (or no article at all). This is because there are few rules governing their use. In addition, there are also a lot of exceptions.

Here is a brief overview of the rules that do exist.

One of many or a particular one?

A/An

We use 'a' or 'an' to mean 'one of many'.

*Example: She is **a** Project Manager in KPMG India.
(She is one of many Project Managers within the company).*

The

We use 'the' to mean 'this/these particular one(s)'.

*Example: She is **the** Project Manager for the implementation of the new QA system.
(There is only one particular Project Manager for this project, and she is it!).*

No Article

We do not use an article (we call this the '**zero article**') when describing things in general terms.

*Example: Project managers need to have highly developed time-management skills.
(This sentence describes Project Managers in general, not specific, terms).*

Does the reader know about it or not?

A/An

We use 'a' when presenting things for the first time and when your reader does not know which one is meant.

*Example: We shall have prepared **a** report on the legal implications of taking such an action by the end of the week.
(This is the first time the reader has read about this report).*

The

We use 'the' when the reader knows about the thing to which you are referring.

Example: We shall have prepared **the** report on the legal implications of taking such an action by the end of the week.
(Your reader knows about this report - it has been mentioned before).

A/An is only used with singular, countable nouns

Examples: I would appreciate **a** prompt response.
I would like ~~an~~ information on the IPO.

If you want to refer to more than one thing or an uncountable thing that our reader does not know about, we can often use 'some' or 'any'.

Example: I would like **some** information on the IPO.
Do you have **any** information about the IPO?

However, we use the zero article when we are thinking about unlimited numbers or quantities (or not thinking about quantities at all!)

Examples: Would you like **any sugar** in your coffee? (a defined quantity/amount of sugar).
The price of **sugar** has dramatically increased in recent months. (we are thinking of sugar as a commodity, not a quantity).

We can use 'the' with all kinds of nouns

We can use 'the' with singular, plural, countable and uncountable nouns.

Examples: **The** e-mail you sent regarding matter was very useful. (singular)
The e-mails you sent regarding this matter were very useful. (plural)
The information you provided was very useful. (uncountable)

Think about the information contained in this helpsheet when you next proofread a piece of your writing in English.

Here are some suggestions for improving your use of articles on your own:

Find a short piece of English text (such as your web site, an e-mail, etc.). Underline all examples of articles and consider why the writer has used them.

Get a colleague to remove the articles from a piece of English text. Your job is to try to replace the articles. Compare your text with the original.

Make a list of all the exceptions to the above 'rules' you encounter when reading in English. Keep this on your desktop for easy reference. Refer to the list when proofreading texts you have written in English.