

3.11 Articles and determiners

Part 1

English sometimes uses "articles" - **the** (*the definite article*) and **a/an** (*the indefinite articles*) - before nouns. Many languages (Asian and Eastern European, for example) do not use equivalent words, thus causing many problems for learners of English. If you use articles incorrectly, or don't use them at all, your tutors will probably understand your writing, but many will find the misuse extremely irritating, which in some cases could affect your mark. It is important, therefore, that you make an effort to use articles correctly.

The biggest problem is probably when students don't write an article when they need to. Here's a simplified guide which should cover most of these cases.

Step 1

First, it is important that you recognise the difference between **countable** and **uncountable** nouns. (See guide 3.10 for further details.)

A **countable** noun is one which can be made plural, almost always by the addition of 's' or '-es'. For example:

table - tables ; report - reports ; match - matches

An **uncountable** noun cannot be made plural. For example:

traffic; pollution; information

Some nouns can be countable or uncountable. For example, *glass* is uncountable when it refers to the material (*this glass is extremely fragile*) or countable when referring to *wine glasses*, for instance.

If you're not sure, check in a good dictionary.

Step 2

Remember this golden rule:

If the noun is COUNTABLE and SINGULAR it must almost always be preceded by an article (or some other 'determiner', such as *this, his* etc).

If you apply this rule while you are writing or proofreading your work, you should make far fewer mistakes. Remember that the noun may be preceded by an adjective or may be a 'compound noun' made up of two or more words.

Look at this sentence:

UK mobile phone market has been flourishing since the 1990s.

The first noun, here the subject of the sentence, is *UK mobile phone market*. Is it countable? Yes, you can say **markets**. Is it singular here? Yes again, so there must be an article or determiner:

The *UK mobile phone market has been flourishing since the 1990s.*

If you're not sure when to use *the* and when to use *a/an*, go to Step 3.

Step 3

The is the definite article, which means that it is used when the writer expects that the reader **knows which** particular thing or person the writer is referring to.

A is the indefinite article and is used when things or people are referred to which are not already known to the reader.

Compare:

*Birmingham has **a** large fish market.* (The first time the market has been mentioned, so 'a')

The market is closed on Mondays. (We now know which market, so 'the')

Also note:

Some and *any* are often used as the plural of *a/an*.

An is used before words which begin with a vowel sound, not simply a vowel. (eg, **an** hour, **an** SSDD office, **an** MA).

Part 2

Unfortunately, it's not quite as simple as the above. Here is some further guidance.

If you speak a Western European language, then article usage is probably very similar in English. You might find the following rules useful, however:

- 1 When we are talking about things or people **in general**, *the* is not normally used if the noun is plural or uncountable. For example:

People are strange. (NOT the people)

Traffic is a problem in most countries. (NOT the traffic)

If you want to refer to *particular* traffic, however, you might then use the article:

The traffic was terrible this morning.

- 2 We use *a/an* when we are classifying people or objects into groups or types, a good example being jobs:

*My father's **an** architect.*

*I use my computer as **a** fax machine.*

- 3 Some nouns are uncountable in English - and therefore cannot be used with *a/an* - but may be countable in other languages. For example:

advice, information, weather, progress, knowledge, equipment, news, research, work

You cannot say: *Let me give you an advice* (better: some advice)

THE

As you have seen, *the* is used when the reader (or listener) already knows, or can guess, what the writer (or speaker) is talking about. Compare:

*I saw **a** really good film at the weekend* (the listener doesn't know yet what film)

***The** film was set in Elizabethan times.* (now the listener does know which film).

Similarly, *the* is used if we're talking about something unique, if there's only one of them, either in the world as a whole, or in our environment:

***The** Earth revolves around the sun.*

***The** centre of Birmingham was closed due to a bomb scare.*

The is almost always used with superlatives, and with words such as *first*, *last* and *only*:

*That was **the** most expensive wine I've ever drunk.*

*Thatcher is **the** only woman Prime Minister this country has ever had.*

The is not used with possessives:

*The results of **our** experiments were very encouraging.* (NOT the our)

With a few exceptions, *the* is not used with proper names:

Could I speak to Vicky? (NOT the Vicky)

Society is changing rapidly in parts of China. (NOT the China)

A/AN

A/an are usually used with singular, countable nouns. The word *one* is not interchangeable: we usually use *one* when there is some connection with number, i.e. *one*, not *two*, *three* or *four*.

We carried out a survey amongst BCU students. (NOT one survey, unless you did several)

You cannot use *a/an* with an adjective alone.

You can't say *Do you like my watch? It's an expensive.*

You say *It's expensive* or *It's an expensive one.*

Remember that the use of *an* depends on pronunciation, not spelling. So:

An SOS message was received by the coastguards.

It's an honour to represent my country.

BCU is a university situated on several sites.

SPECIAL USES

Sometimes countable nouns are considered to be uncountable and used without an article. This happens quite often with places/institutions, for example: *school, university, church, prison, hospital*

*I went **to school** in Birmingham*

*She's **in hospital** having a minor operation on her leg.*

*He was sent **to prison** for 10 years.*

Note that in these examples *I went to school **as a pupil***; *She's in hospital **as a patient***; *he went to prison **as a prisoner***. If you use similar expressions with an article, then the meaning changes; instead, you are in the place as a visitor, or you work there:

*We're going **to the school** to see my daughter's teacher.*

*I went **to the hospital** to visit my uncle.*

Other phrases which do not use an article include:

on foot, by car/bus/train etc,

to/in/from town, to/at/from home

by day, at night

Do **not** use an article when you are referring to tables, figures, pages, appendices, chapters or sections in your written work.

Table 3 shows the percentage of...

As can be seen in Fig.8...

The results of the survey can be found in Appendix 1.

Do not use an article with a noun after an '-s' possessive.

The Constitution used in America = America's constitution (NOT the America's constitution)

Articles are **not** used with days and months, unless you are talking about a particular day or month. So:

The agreement was signed in November.

The examination will take place on Thursday.

*Courses start on Monday. **The** Monday I intended to start, however, was a public holiday.*

Note the following when talking about **television**, **radio**, **cinema** and the **theatre**.

Do **not** use an article with television when you are referring to the medium.

Television has become a very powerful way of influencing people.

The President made his statement on television.

Do use an article, however, if you are referring to a television set:

We have a vase of flowers on the television.

Articles are usually used with *radio*, *cinema* and *theatre*, although we do also say *Radio is becoming less important as a medium.*

The is not used with titles which include the name of the person:

The professor introduced himself to the audience.

Professor Philpot will be retiring at the end of the year.

Queen Elizabeth has says she will never abdicate.

We usually uses possessives rather than *the* when we talk about parts of the body:

*He hit **his** head getting into the car.*

*They all crossed **their** fingers before starting.*