

# Articles

There are three articles in English: *the*, *a* and *an*. They precede and provide information about nouns and noun phrases (namely, about people, places, things or concepts). This handout contains some common usages, but there are many exceptions that must be noted and memorised over time.

## The definite article: *the*

*The* can be used with singular, plural, countable, and uncountable (or mass) nouns.<sup>1</sup> Use *the* when referring to something specific that your audience will recognise, for example:

Nouns that have been mentioned previously, or are clearly related to something mentioned previously	The party featured <b>a</b> band and <b>a</b> catered meal. <b>The</b> band was excellent, but <b>the</b> food was gone by nine!
Cases where the context indicates clearly <i>which</i> thing is being referred to	Mum, can I borrow <b>the</b> car? <b>The</b> Prime Minister is concerned about child poverty. <b>The</b> results of the investigation . . .
Organisation names that contain a generic word such as organisation, commission or foundation <sup>2</sup>	<b>The</b> Earthquake Commission, <b>the</b> Breast Cancer Foundation
Country or regional names that contain a generic word, (e.g., republic, kingdom or state/states) or have a plural form <sup>2</sup>	<b>The</b> Czech Republic, <b>the</b> United Kingdom, <b>the</b> South Island, <b>the</b> Philippines, <b>the</b> State of Tasmania, <b>the</b> United States
Geographical features such as rivers, oceans, mountain ranges and deserts where the name includes the specific feature <sup>2</sup>	<b>The</b> Rakaia River, <b>the</b> Pacific Ocean, <b>the</b> Rocky Mountains, <b>the</b> Sahara Desert, <b>the</b> Tararua Ranges
Categories or classifications	<b>The</b> moa (an entire species), <b>the</b> human brain (a type of organ/body part shared by all people)
A unique person, place or thing	<b>The</b> sun, <b>the</b> Pope, <b>the</b> International Space Station, <b>the</b> NZ dollar, <b>the</b> Reihana whanau (family), <b>the</b> internet
Ordinal numbers (first, second, etc.) and superlatives (the tallest, the best, etc.)	<b>The</b> first test is always <b>the</b> hardest.
Plural nouns preceded by "of"	Most/all/none/many of <b>the</b> classes were interesting.
Centuries and decades <sup>3</sup>	<b>The</b> 19 <sup>th</sup> century, <b>the</b> 1960s

<p><b>Usage for some common place nouns</b> (e.g., school, university, hospital, prison, church)</p> <p>When referring to the physical location, use <i>the</i>.</p> <p>When referring to these places in the context of someone's role there, use zero article.</p>	<p>There's a new auditorium at the school.</p> <p>I'm going to school at 7.30 today (likely to be said by a student or staff member of the school)</p>
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<sup>1</sup> See explanation of countable and uncountable nouns on page two.

<sup>2</sup> The underlying logic is that the audience needs to know which specific organisation, republic, or ocean, for instance, is being referred to.

<sup>3</sup> Individual years take zero article, e.g., David Lange became Prime Minister in 1984.

## Indefinite articles: *a*, *an*

Because they refer to just one thing (for instance, a book or a thought) indefinite articles are only used with singular, countable nouns. *A* is used before words that start with a consonant sound (not necessarily a consonant letter); *an* is used before words that begin with vowel sounds. Use *a* or *an* for:

A non-specific mention of something	I need to buy <b>a</b> car. Does anyone have <b>an</b> iPhone charger?
Singular nouns mentioned for the first time	<b>A</b> kererū (wood pigeon) flew right in front of me. <b>An</b> apple pie was sitting on the table.
The first mention of something that is part of a whole	I ate <b>a</b> piece of the pie. Then I had another. <b>The</b> second piece didn't taste as good.
An expression of frequency, cost or rate	Once <b>a</b> week, two dollars <b>a</b> kilo, 50 kms <b>an</b> hour
Describing someone's occupation or what something is	Lucy is <b>a</b> quantity surveyor. Tomatoes are actually <b>a</b> fruit.

## Zero articles

The term "zero article" is often used to refer to cases where no article is required, for instance:

For plural or uncountable nouns that refer to someone/something in general	<b>Dogs</b> have twice as many neurons as <b>cats</b> . Is <b>knowledge</b> more valuable than <b>money</b> ?
Most names, e.g., personal names, places, countries, continents, days, seasons, months, years, companies/organisations that don't have a generic word in the title	Rawiri, Kathryn, Tuesday, summer, Christchurch, South America, 1984, Google, Fonterra
Zero article applies for <i>work</i> in its uncountable form in the sense of workplace.	Matt is at <b>work</b> [his workplace].

## Countable and uncountable nouns

A countable noun can be used in singular or plural forms. Most nouns in English are countable. Some nouns that are abstract or difficult to count are referred to as uncountable and can only be used in singular form with a definite or zero article. Common uncountable nouns used in academic writing include *information*, *research*, *advice* and *knowledge*.

Some nouns have both countable and uncountable forms that have different meanings. In general, the uncountable form refers to something abstract or general, while the countable form is more specific. For example:

Uncountable form (abstract, general)	Countable form (something specific)
He finds <b>work</b> energizing.	Picasso's early <b>works</b> included realist sketches.
Universal <b>education</b> is vital for democracy.	Kura kaupapa provide a well-rounded <b>education</b> .
Trainee doctors require extensive <b>experience</b> .	We had very different <b>experiences</b> of the party.
Healthy relationships rely on good <b>communication</b> .	The journalist received three email <b>communications</b> from the Ombudsman.

If you are unsure whether a noun is countable, uncountable or both, check a dictionary such as the Oxford online dictionary <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/> (note that they use the term "mass noun" for uncountable nouns).

## Exercise 1\*

Fill in the blanks with the correct article, either *a*, *an*, *the* or  $\emptyset$  (where an article is not required).

“(a)\_\_\_\_ New Zealand has (b)\_\_\_\_ shorter human history than any other country. (c)\_\_\_\_ precise date of settlement is (d)\_\_\_\_ matter of debate, but current understanding is that (e)\_\_\_\_ first arrivals came from (f)\_\_\_\_ East Polynesia in (g)\_\_\_\_ late 13th century. It was not until (h)\_\_\_\_ 1642 that (i)\_\_\_\_ Europeans became aware (j)\_\_\_\_ country existed.

(k)\_\_\_\_ original Polynesian settlers discovered (l)\_\_\_\_ country on deliberate voyages of exploration, navigating by (m)\_\_\_\_ ocean currents and (n)\_\_\_\_ winds and stars. (o)\_\_\_\_ navigator credited in some traditions with discovering New Zealand is Kupe. Some time later (p)\_\_\_\_ first small groups arrived from Polynesia. Now known as Māori, these tribes did not identify themselves by (q)\_\_\_\_ collective name until the arrival of Europeans when, to mark their distinctiveness, (r)\_\_\_\_ name Māori, meaning ‘ordinary’, came into use.”\*\*

## Exercise 2

Fill in the blanks with the correct article, either *a*, *an*, *the* or  $\emptyset$  (where an article is not required).

“(a)\_\_\_\_ university education is much more than (b)\_\_\_\_ qualification you get at (c)\_\_\_\_ end. Adapting to life at (d)\_\_\_\_ university is one of (e)\_\_\_\_ most rewarding challenges you will ever face. Whatever subject you decide to study, going to university will equip you with (f)\_\_\_\_ skills that you can apply to your academic work, your career and in your personal life.

(g)\_\_\_\_ chance to nurture (h)\_\_\_\_ academic passion over several years guided by (i)\_\_\_\_ expert in that field, while simultaneously enjoying (j)\_\_\_\_ independence, (k)\_\_\_\_ extracurricular activities and new friends is not to be easily overlooked.”\*\*\*

\* Exercises adapted from Flinders University (2013). *Articles*. Retrieved from [http://www.flinders.edu.au/slc\\_files/Documents/Yellow%20Guides/Articles.pdf](http://www.flinders.edu.au/slc_files/Documents/Yellow%20Guides/Articles.pdf).

\*\* Wilson, J. (2005). History—Māori arrival and settlement. *Te Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. Retrieved from <https://teara.govt.nz/en/history/page-1>.

\*\*\* Pure Potential (n.d.). *Why go to Uni?* Retrieved from <http://purepotential.org/introduction/why-go-to-uni/>.

## Answers

### Exercise 1

- (a) **∅** proper name of country that needs no article
- (b) **a** singular, countable noun\* mentioned for the first time
- (c) **the** specific noun related to previous information (New Zealand's human history)
- (d) **a** singular countable noun describing what something is
- (e) **the** specific noun related to previous information (date of settlement)
- (f) **∅** proper name for region that needs no article
- (g) **the** a century
- (h) **∅** the name of a year
- (i) **∅** plural noun referring to Europeans in general
- (j) **the** specific noun related to previous information
- (k) **the** specific noun related to previous paragraph
- (l) **the** specific noun related to previous paragraph
- (m) **∅** plural noun referring to currents in general. Could also use *the* if referring to specific regional currents
- (n) **the** definite article implies reference to specific winds of the region. Could also use zero article if referring to winds in general
- (o) **the** specific noun related to subsequent information (naming of Kupe)
- (p) **the** specific noun related to previous information
- (q) **a** singular, countable noun (name) mentioned for the first time
- (r) **the** specific noun mentioned previously in sentence

### Exercise 2

- (a) **a** singular, countable noun\* mentioned for the first time
- (b) **the** specific noun linked to previous information (i.e., the particular education undertaken). Could also use *a* if referring to a non-specific qualification.
- (c) **the** specific noun related to previous information (the particular education)
- (d) **∅** rule for school, university, etc.
- (e) **the** plural noun preceded by *of* (one of the most rewarding challenges)
- (f) **∅** plural noun referring to skills in general. Could also be *the* if referring to specific skills
- (g) **the** specific noun (*which* chance) related to subsequent information in the sentence
- (h) **an** non-specific mention of something starting with a vowel sound
- (i) **an** non-specific mention of something (expert not specified) starting with vowel sound
- (j) **∅** uncountable noun that refers to independence in general
- (k) **∅** plural noun that refers to extracurricular activities in general

\*This noun can be either countable or uncountable, but is countable in this instance.