

ARTICLES HELP PAGE

The **indefinite article (a, an)** and the **definite article (the)** are difficult for non-native speakers to master and their misuse or omission is one of the most common written errors made by Hong Kong students. Here we will outline the main grammar rules related to correct usage.

1. Indefinite Articles: *a, an*

Indefinite articles (*a, an*) are generally used with singular, countable nouns when the noun is general (i.e. indefinite). They are also used when something is talked or written about for the first time and to indicate membership of a profession, nation, or religion.

"A" goes before words beginning with a consonant sound.

e.g. **a** lecturer, **a** final year project, **a** university student

N.B. When u makes the same sound as the y in you, then '**a**' is used. This 'y' sound (e.g. yooniversity) is acting as a consonant.

e.g. **a** university, **a** united front, **a** useful reference, **a** U.S. marine

"An" goes before all words that begin with a vowel sound.

e.g. **an** engineer, **an** intermediary, **an** obvious mistake

N.B. Use **an** before unsounded *h*. Since the 'h' has no audible sound, the sound that follows the article is a vowel.

e.g. **an** hourly paid student helper, **an** honourable member of society.

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between **a** and **an** depends on the initial sound of the adjective:

e.g. **a** brave action, **an** unusual problem, **a** European country

2. Definite Article: *the*

"The" is generally used before singular and plural nouns when the noun refers to a particular or specific member of a group.

e.g. **The** lecturer in accountancy, **the** FYP with the highest grade

"The" is also used when something has been previously talked or written about. When we first refer to something in written text, we often use an indefinite article to refer to it.

e.g. **A** newspaper has an obligation to seek out and tell the truth.

In a subsequent reference to this newspaper, however, we will use the definite article:

e.g. There are situations, however, when the newspaper must determine whether the public's safety is jeopardized by knowing the truth.

"The" is also used to refer to something unique

e.g. **The** HK Polytechnic University. **The** theory of relativity .

The HK handover. **The** Equator

"The" is also used when the noun it accompanies refers to something in the abstract:

e.g. The Hong Kong Government has encouraged **the** use of public transport systems as opposed to **the** use of **the** private automobile

"The" is also used with uncountable nouns that are made more specific by a modifying phrase or clause.

e.g. **The** coffee is too hot to drink.

The English she spoke was a north- eastern dialect.

The happiness they felt was short-lived.

Use of 'a', 'an','the' or no article

Definite and indefinite articles are/can be used to indicate a whole class to which individual countable nouns belong. Articles can also be omitted however (so you'll get it right no matter which way you choose!)

- **A** university degree requires a great deal of commitment. (any individual degree)
- **The** university degree requires a great deal of commitment. (all degrees).
- University degrees require a great deal of commitment. (all degrees)

NB: Uncountable nouns almost never take an article:

- **Anger** is a destructive emotion.

3. No Article

Articles are not used with uncountable nouns which refer to something in a general sense.

- Coffee is drunk extensively in Brazil.
- English was her mother tongue.
- Happiness is difficult to quantify.

They are also not used with

- **languages and nationalities (Chinese, English, Thai),**
- **sports (football, volleyball),**
- **academic subjects (engineering, electronics, business, mathematics, hotel management).**
- **The following geographical features**

- Names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- Most names of countries (China, Scotland, Thailand). Exceptions: the Netherlands, the Philippines, the UK, the US.
- Names of cities, towns, or states (Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Sichuan)
- Names of mountains, lakes and islands (Mount Stenhouse, Lake Michigan, Lantau).
- Exceptions: ranges of mountains (the Andes, the Himalayas), groups of lakes and islands (the Great Lakes, the Hebrides, the Andaman islands)

Common count nouns are used without articles in certain special situations, including:

Some expressions using 'be' and 'go' (by train, in school etc)
 Seasons (Spring, Autumn)
 Meals (lunch, supper)
 Diseases (he died of cancer, she caught pneumonia)

