



ARTICLES

	Singular noun	Plural noun	Uncountable noun
Indefinite (non-specific): talking about things in general	a/an	no article	no article
Definite (specific): talking about particular things	the	the	the

A? An? The? No article? Are there any rules?

1. When you are introducing something new, or something that the reader or listener is not aware of, use **a/an** with singular nouns. **A** is used before a noun (or noun phrase) that begins with a consonant sound (e.g. a university assignment); **an** is used before a noun (or noun phrase) that begins with a vowel sound (e.g. an assignment). Example:

Almost every UTS student has **a smartphone**. (Indefinite singular noun)

2. Use **the** to indicate that the noun that follows is something that the reader or listener is aware of. The reader or listener knows what it is by referring forward or backward in the text or conversation. Examples:

The most popular smartphone in Australia is **the iPhone**, which accounts for 36.5% of **the smartphone market share**. (Definite singular noun)

The amount of information freely available on the Internet seems to be infinite. (Definite uncountable noun)

3. Leave out articles before plural and uncountable nouns when you are referring to things in general. Examples:

Fifty percent of the Australian population is now using **smartphones**. (Indefinite plural noun)

Increasingly, smartphones have replaced computers when it comes to accessing **information** from the Internet. (Indefinite uncountable noun)

4. Most place names do not require the definite article, except when there is an *adjective* or *of* in the name, or a *plural noun* in the name. Example:

Although Apple is based in **the United States of America**, most of their products are manufactured in **the People's Republic of China**. Apple products are widely popular in many Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, **the** Philippines, and Indonesia.

More examples

- a. **An** online survey was conducted to collate users' feedback on the usefulness of these learning tools. **The** survey consisted of five short questions, and could be completed in less than two minutes.

An is used in the first instance to introduce the survey as it's a piece of new information. **The** is used in the second instance as the writer is referring to a specific survey that has been introduced in the preceding sentence.

- b. *Research in China* has shown that students who devote at least two hours a day on their studies have a higher chance of doing well in their exams. **A** similar research study was carried out in Australia; however, **the** research results are inconclusive.

Research is an uncountable noun, and because the writer is not referring to any specific piece of research, no article is necessary before the noun phrase 'Research in China'. In 'A similar research study', the writer is introducing a new piece of information, which is **a** similar study done in Australia; 'research' in this case is not a noun, but it acts as an adjective to tell us the nature of the study. Similarly, in 'the research results', 'research' functions as an adjective, and **the** is used to refer to results of the aforementioned research study.

Consider the following pairs of examples, and determine if one or both are correct. If in doubt, see a HELPS advisor for clarification.

1. *A smartphone is an important communication tool* vs *The smartphone is an important communication tool*
2. *A smartphone has transformed the way we communicate* vs *The smartphone has transformed the way we communicate*

There are many rules, and rules of exception, with the use of articles. For more information, please consult the following:

Hewings, M. 2005, *Advanced grammar in use: a self-study and practice book for advanced students of English*, 2nd edn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Paterson, K. 2012, *Oxford living grammar: upper-intermediate*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Swan, M. 2011, *Practical English Usage*, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Swan, M. & Walter, C. 2000, *How English works: a grammar practice book*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Swan, M. & Walter, C. 2011, *Oxford English grammar course: advanced*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

