



Description

Articles function as limiting adjectives that help us understand which person, place, thing, or concept is being discussed. Despite their simplistic rules, articles and commas are the most difficult to tackle for non-native English speakers. Article usage can be quite idiosyncratic in academic writing, and when writing manuscripts, one has to be particularly aware of the context of usage. In this post, we shall systematically categorize article usage in academic writing.

Native [usage of articles](#) develops over time as a result of extensive reading, observation, contextual understanding, and, of course, participation in conversation. However, in most cases, the proper article to be used can be determined by asking a few simple questions.

When a noun is mentioned, the author is referring to:

- Do they mean all nouns of the same kind everywhere?
- Are they referring to one of many?
- Are they referring to that one specifically?

Thus, every reference to a noun has a choice of articles

- All nouns of the same kind everywhere (denoted by *a/an*, *the*, or *no article*)
- One of many (denoted by either *no article* or *a/an*)
- A specific reference (denoted by *the*)

Hence, the first step is to determine whether the noun is a proper noun (definite article or no article) or common noun (indefinite articles). Next, in case of a common noun, it is important to determine whether the reference is generic or specific. Generic references would mean that a noun represents all examples without mentioning a specific category (e.g., policies vs. economic policies). Specific references would include introducing a common noun in a text (with an indefinite article or no articles) and using the definite article in consequent references. Article usage may then vary with the context.

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Use of the Definite Article

Proper Noun

1. *The* United Nations, founded in 1945, is currently made up of 193 Member States.
2. Tumor resection with cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB) is still disputable in *the field of oncology*.

Contextual (specific) Reference

The method introduced in H1 yielded the same results as the other method used in H2. (where the method has already been introduced; thus, it is a noun that has already been defined and can be referred to using the definite article)

Use of Indefinite Articles

If the noun that is being defined/modified is one of many (i.e., an example or a single member of a group), indefinite articles such as “a” or “an” should be used:

Human Genome Project was an exciting development towards personalized medicine.

Article Usage with Countable and Non-count Nouns

1. If a noun is being used as a representative of every instance or individual, its singular form can be used along with the definite article.

The smartphone has become an inalienable part of modern existence.

Alternatively, the plural form can also be used for a generic reference. However, the definite article must be omitted in this case.

Smartphones have become an inalienable part of modern existence.

2. In English, mass nouns are ones that cannot be counted and usually lack a plural in general usage.

Wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it. (Albert Einstein)

Note!

- No article is used when a plural noun is introduced in the text (first mention). However, the definite article can be used to refer to that specific noun from the second mention onwards for clarity.
- Articles are usually omitted in titles and headlines to save space and boost impact.

References:

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Category

1. Language & Grammar
2. Reporting Research

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