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Articles: a, an, the

Use a or an before a singular countable noun when the listener does not know which one: a laptop, an idea. Use the when the listener knows which one: the laptop I bought. Use no article for plural or uncountable nouns in general statements: Technology changes life.

What to know

The three choices

Most nouns in English need one of three choices before them: **a or an**, **the**, or **no article** (called the zero article). The choice depends on one question: does the listener or reader know exactly which one you mean?

A and an: one of many

Use **a** or **an** with singular countable nouns when the thing is new to the listener, or when you are naming a job or a type: I bought a laptop. She is an engineer. It was a difficult exam.

- *an apple* · vowel sound
- *a university* · consonant sound /j/
- *an hour* · silent h

The: both of you know which one

Use **the** with any noun when the listener knows exactly which one. This happens in four main ways. First, it was mentioned before: I bought a laptop. The laptop is very fast. Second, it is clear from the situation: Please close the door. Third, there is only one: the sun, the government, the internet, the environment. Fourth, a phrase or clause makes it specific: the city where I grew up.

No article: general ideas

When you talk about a whole group or a general idea, use no article with plural and uncountable nouns: Children need exercise. Water is essential. Education improves lives. Technology has changed communication.

Fixed expressions

Some phrases keep or drop the article by habit. People go to school, to university, to hospital, to work and to bed (as a student, patient or worker), without the. But we say the school is closed or I went to the hospital to visit her when we mean a particular building.

Exercises

1. I bought a laptop yesterday. _____ laptop is very fast, and I use it every day.
 - a. A
 - b. The
 - c. An
2. She is _____ honest person.

a. an

b. a

3. Many people believe that _____ money cannot buy happiness.

a. a

b. (no article)

c. the

4. Mount Everest is _____ highest mountain in the world.

a. a

b. an

c. the

5. My brother studies at _____ university in Manchester.

a. an

b. a

6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Many people (2) believe that (3) the pollution (4) is a global problem.

7. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) She is (2) studying (3) a English (4) at university.

8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): how / internet / changed / communicate. / we / an / The / has

9. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): to / the / future. / engineer / a / in / be / He / an / wants

10. Correct this: *The education is the key to a better life.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/articles-a-an-the/practice/

IELTS tip. Articles show up in every part of the test, and they matter most in Writing, where a missing or extra the is easy to spot. After you write, scan every singular countable noun for a, an or the, and check every general plural noun for an unwanted the.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Articles: a, an, the

AIM	Learners choose a, an, the or no article by asking whether the noun is specific, and apply the rule in speaking and writing.
TIME	35 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Show a picture and say There is a man, a dog and a car. Then ask What does the man do? so that learners notice the shift from a to the.

Lesson steps

1. Introduce the question 'Does the listener know which one?' and sort ten noun phrases into a, an, the and zero.
2. Practise a and an by sound with a rapid list: hour, university, MBA, umbrella, European, honest, one-way.
3. Run a short story activity in which learners must use a for first mention and the for second mention.
4. Teach general versus specific nouns with Task 2 sentences: Education is important vs The education in my country is free.
5. Learners proofread a short paragraph with eight article errors and explain each fix.

Extension

Learners proofread their own last Task 2 essay, circling every noun and recording the article reason in the margin.

Answer key

1. b) The. The laptop has been mentioned, so both speaker and listener know which one.
2. a) an. Honest begins with a vowel sound because the h is silent, so use an.
3. b) (no article). Money is uncountable and general here, so use no article.
4. c) the. Use the with a superlative.
5. b) a. University begins with a y sound, which is a consonant sound, so use a.
6. Part 3: *the pollution* → **pollution**. Pollution is uncountable and general in this sentence, so use no article.
7. Part 3: *a English* → **English**. Languages take no article.
8. The internet has changed how we communicate. The internet is a unique thing, so it takes the.

9. He wants to be an engineer in the future. Engineer begins with a vowel sound, so it takes an.
10. Education is the key to a better life. Education in general is uncountable and takes no article.

Questions learners often ask

What is the difference between a and the? A refers to one of many, or to something new. The refers to something both people already know about, or the only one.

When do I use no article? Use no article with plural and uncountable nouns when you talk about things in general, such as Children need exercise or Water is essential.

Why do we say an hour but a university? The choice depends on sound. Hour starts with a vowel sound, since the h is silent. University starts with a y sound, which is a consonant sound.

Do I need an article before every noun? Every singular countable noun needs one (a, an, the or another word like my or this). Plural and uncountable nouns may take no article.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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