

ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION INFO SHEET

Grammar: Articles: 'the', 'a' and 'an' (G: A)

When you are writing or talking about **a** person, **an** object, or **the** idea, you are using **articles**. Articles are used to give further definition of what it is you are referring to. They make it clear whether you are referring to specific thing specifically, or being more general in your discussion.

Learn about:

- The types of articles
- When to use articles
- Examples of sentences using articles

See also **Info Sheets** on academic writing, topic sentences, text connectives

Articles are divided into two types:

Definite articles

Indefinite articles

Definite Articles: When you are writing and you need to refer to something specifically, you write 'the'.

Example:

When writing academically it is necessary to ensure **the** ideas you are using are referenced correctly. This means including **the** author's name, **the** year and **the** page number if it is given.

In the above example you are referring to a specific author, who wrote in a specific year and the information can be found on a specific page.

Indefinite Articles: When you are writing or speaking more generally, about a person, place or object, then you still need to use an article, but in this case you would write 'a' or 'an'.

Example:

Reports usually include **an** Executive Summary, **a** Table of Contents, **an** introduction, **a** discussion, **a** conclusion, recommendations and **a** reference list.

In the above example you are discussing reports generally, not one specific report. If you are unsure whether you should be writing 'a' or 'an', there is a general rule to follow. If the word that comes after the indefinite article begins with a vowel (a, e, i, o, or u), then you need to use 'an'. For the other letters of the alphabet, you can normally use 'a'.

Example:

An author is a person who has written the book or journal you are reading. ('author' begins with a vowel so you would use 'an')

A sentence is made up of a subject or topic, the related actions and outcomes. ('sentence' does not begin with a vowel so use 'a')

When don't you need an article?

If what you are writing about has more than one of it (so is plural) or is referring to all of the things (uncountable), then you don't always need an article. This is especially true for the beginning of sentences.

Examples:

Books are read widely by students while they are studying.

Students need to understand that reading is an essential part of researching a topic.

In the above examples, it is not a specific book or even one or two students, but a very large number of books and students. Where people sometimes become confused is when they see something written as a plural, like books, but do not realise that it is a specific set of books that is being referred to.

Example:

Each student needs to ensure that they have purchased **the books** that are required for the course.

In this example, although there is more than one book, the books in question relate to a specific course, they are **the** books for **the** course, so you would need to use 'the' definite article.

More Info

For more ideas and examples on this and other areas:

<http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/articleterm.htm>

<http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-are-articles-in-english-grammar-definition-use-examples.html>

Practice exercises and explanations, try the University of Adelaide

<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni/articles/>