To do the exercises, think carefully about each noun, using the following chart:

Is the noun singular and countable?	Is the noun plural or uncountable?
Yes	Yes
Is it definite?	Is it definite?
yes — the no — a/an	yes — the no — no article
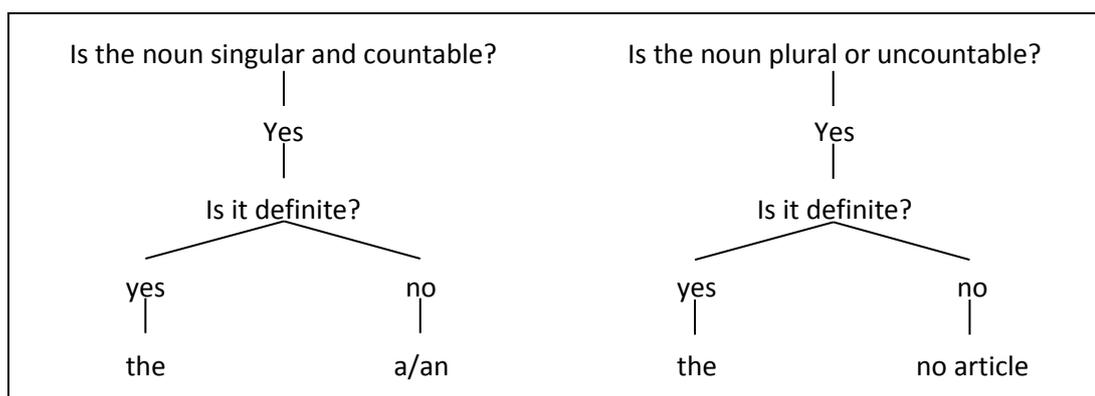
The above chart is based on information in: Master, P 1986, *Science, medicine and technology: English grammar and technical writing*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.

Remember: If you have a singular countable noun then you *must* use an article in almost every case. (If you have words like *my, one*, *each* or *both* before the noun, then no article is necessary.) If you don't know whether a noun is countable or not, check in an English learner's dictionary. There are at least six of these freely available online.

Sometimes there is more than one choice when using an article – even native speakers disagree, depending on whether or not they feel the noun is definite or not.

The definite article (the)

If your reader or listener understands what you are referring to, then you will usually need the definite article:
*I bought **a book** last week. **The book** is about trees.* (You have just mentioned the book, so you both know which one.)
*We went to **a wedding** yesterday. **The bride** wore a lovely dress.* (You have not mentioned the bride before, but you both know she is connected to the wedding.)

Some things are taken to be common knowledge in English and therefore take the definite article:

Decades – He was born in *the 1920s*.
Currencies – *The dollar* is getting stronger against *the pound*.
Superlatives and ordinals – *The second* book in the series is *the best*.
Oceans, seas and many rivers –*The Nile* flows into *the Mediterranean*.
Plural or 'united' countries (those which have the word *United* in their name) – *The Maldives* are much smaller than *the United States of America*.
Adjectives used as nouns – *The poor* will always be a challenge for *the rich* in any country.
Many organisations – *The World Health Organisation* has a detailed definition of health.
A scientific categorisation – *The zebra* is native to Africa.
A symbol – *The Merlion* is a symbol of Singapore.
Unique people, places or things – *The prime minister* said she would call a conference on

changes affecting the earth's climate. (Each country has only one prime minister, so in that sense the person is unique.)
Unique adjectives – *The same* people always take *the only* parking spaces available.

Other word patterns which take *the*:

Specific nouns modified by a relative clause – *The paintings* (which are) in the gallery
Specific nouns followed by 'of'. This is a very common pattern – *The use of* this procedure
Plural nouns preceded by 'of' – e.g. *None of the paintings* were interesting.

Common error:

You cannot write *most of paintings* or *none of paintings*. It is either *most of the paintings* (definite) or *most paintings* (general).

Most of the paintings in the exhibition were landscapes. (definite – we know which specific paintings – they are in the exhibition)

Most paintings nowadays are quite abstract. (general – not specific paintings)

The indefinite article (a/an)

If the noun is singular and countable, and this is the first time you have mentioned it, then you will usually need the indefinite article:

I bought *a book* – we do not know which book.

There is *a bird* outside – we do not know anything about the bird.

Measurements and rates also take the indefinite article: Three times *a week*

No article

We do not need an article if a noun is plural or uncountable and it is not definite.

Women generally live longer than *men.*
Articles are difficult to use.
Paint is hard to remove.

Definitions

Definitions can take *a/an*, *the* or no article. For example,

A library is a place where you find books. This means that any library is a place where you find books.

The library is a place where you find books. This views the library as a particular type of place, representative of a category of buildings such as university buildings. (For instance, *the library*, *the lecture theatre* or *the student centre* are buildings that can be found on all university campuses in Australia).

Libraries are places where you find books. This means that all libraries are places where you find books.

Zero and null articles – for advanced grammar lovers

'Zero article' and 'null article' refer to those occasions when you do not use an article. Peter Master (1997, p. 222) gives six ways in which a zero article can be used with a noun:

first mention (*Men are fools*); general characteristics (*Snails have shells*); existential *there* (*There are holes in your socks*); defining postmodification (*Cars from Japan are reliable*); partitive of-phrases (*We drank gallons of coffee*); and intentional vagueness (*Capitals of nations are rich*).

The 'null article' appears before proper nouns and some singular countable nouns. For example, *Ms Parrot* visited us after *lunch*.

There is controversy about the application of the terms 'zero' and 'null' article. If you'd like to know more about them, have a look at the references section below.

References and further reading

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