Articles

A/an, the

Articles do matter, even though a sentence with no articles can still be understood. (We call this text messaging).

For example: Pick me up after movie and take me to restaurant. This is incorrect when used in formal writing.

We need to say: Pick me up after the movie and take me to the restaurant.

So why do articles matter?

Articles belong to a group of words called ‘determiners’.
Determiners also include:
- possessives – ‘my’
- demonstratives – ‘this’
- quantifiers – ‘all’

Determiners bring clarity to what we are saying or writing. They determine our meaning.

Are there still some occasions when articles are not needed?

Yes. When we talk about things in general we do not need to use the.

For example: My cousin likes surfing (NOT the surfing).
Love is blind (NOT The love is blind).

When are articles definitely necessary?

We do need a/an when classifying: What is your job? group? role?

For example: Cathy is a nurse (NOT Cathy is nurse).
An octopus has 8 tentacles (NOT Octopus has 8 tentacles).
Do not use your back as a crane (NOT...back as crane).

What are the different articles used for?

- **A/an** = the indefinite article. The thing being referred to is NOT KNOWN.
  
  For example: A chef must be good at cooking (= any chef).
  A florist must like flowers (= any florist).

- **The** = the definite article. The thing being referred to IS KNOWN.

  For example: I am going to ring the dentist (= you know it’s my dentist).
  Turn the lights off in the car (= you know it’s my car).
Summary:

- Most nouns need a determiner (article).


I am going to read a book (any book).
I am going to read the book (this specific book).
Let’s go and see a movie (any movie).
Let’s go and see the movie (this specific movie).

I have read the book, now I am going to see the movie (specific book, specific movie).

- A/an = used when the listener DOES NOT KNOW which one.

For example: We travelled around New Zealand in a campervan (the listener does not know which campervan).
Why don’t you get a pet? (the listener does not know which pet).

- The = used when the listener DOES KNOW which one.

For example: Are you painting the house? (the listener does know which house).
Please pass me the phone (the listener does know which phone).

- The = used when there is only one of these things.

For example: The All Blacks
The Government
The sun
The Irish

Special note: When do I use ‘a’ and when do I use ‘an’?

Use a before a consonant sound. A vehicle, a keyboard, a screen.
Use an before a vowel sound (a,e,i,o,u). An apple, an egg, an umbrella.

Exceptions:
- Use a before ‘u’ when it sounds like ‘yoo’
  For example: a unit NOT an unit
- Use an before ‘h’ when the ‘h’ is not sounded
  For example: an hour NOT a hour