



## Articles

### A, An, & The

Articles are words used in conjunction with nouns that allow the user to determine the definite or indefinite status of a noun.

Articles in English are “a”, “an”, and “the.”

In STEM fields, articles are particularly important for distinguishing between known (definite) and unknown (indefinite) nouns. For example, “the reaction” (definite) would assume the reader knows which exact reaction the paper is describing, whereas “a reaction” (indefinite) would be a reaction that may not have been previously referred to or might be a generalization.

The use of “an” is reserved for nouns that start with vowel sounds.

### Zero Article

In addition to definite and indefinite articles, a “zero article” also exists. This is the absence of an article before a noun that is a general, indefinite concept or is a plural noun. For example, “math” is a noun that is general and no article needs to be applied; likewise, “reactions” is a plural, general concept that does not require an article.

The zero article differs from an indefinite article as zero-article nouns are typically uncountable, while indefinite nouns are just not specified. For example, “an equation” is an indefinite noun as we do not know what equation the writer is referring to, while “equations” is plural and, in this case, conceptual as we do not have an identified quantity, so this noun has no article.

### Determining Definite & Indefinite Articles

To determine whether an article is definite or indefinite, first determine if the noun is countable or uncountable. If it is uncountable, use the zero article. If it is countable, determine if this is the first usage or if the noun refers to a non-specific usage. If the noun is non-specific or if this is the first time using the noun, it is indefinite and an indefinite article must be used. If it is countable and specific, the definite article should be used.

A flowchart is provided to make this easier.



## Article Flowchart

