Use Articles

Not every language in the world has an equivalent to the articles (i.e. "a," "an," & "the") found in English. To use articles correctly, you must recognise which words in the sentence are nouns and whether these nouns are:

- singular or plural

- count or noncount

- general or specific

What Is a Noun?

In simplistic terms, a noun "refers to a thing [cricket], a person [Ajinkya Rahane], an animal [lion], a place [Melbourne Cricket Ground], a quality [determination], an idea [captaincy], or an action [winning]" (Mirriam-Webster, 2020, para. 2). Yes, some words that end in "-ing" can be nouns. Such nouns are called *gerunds* (Mirriam-Webster, 2020). It may be easier to identify a gerund by putting the words "the act of" in front of it.

Word Type	Example
Noun (gerund)	**[The act of] Winning** a game of test cricket against India is hard work.
Verb phrase	Currently, India **is winning** most matches against Australia.

Singular Versus Plural

Singular refers to only one (e.g. "pitch") whereas *plural* refers to more than one (e.g. "pitches"). Plural nouns that are general do not take either "a" or "an" before them (as in "pitches," below). Remember there will often be one or more adjectives between the article and the noun (e.g. "cricket" is an adjective in the examples, below, because it is describing the kind of pitch/pitches).

Word Type	Example
Singular noun	*A* cricket **pitch** with less moisture helps batters score more runs.
Plural noun	Cricket **pitches** with more grass can help spin bowlers get wickets.

Count Versus Noncount

Count nouns answer a 'How many?' question. They do not always end in "-s" when in plural form (as for "sheep" and "strata," below). Noncount (or mass) nouns answer a 'How much?' question. Some nouns can be count or noncount depending on the context (as for "hair," below). To find out whether a noun is count (C) or noncount (NC), look in a good ESL dictionary such as *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*.

Count noun	How many **apples** do we have?	one apple, two apples
	How many **sheep** do we have?	one sheep, two sheep
	How many **strata** do we have?	one stratum, many strata
	How many **hairs** are in your soup?	one hair, two hairs
Noncount (mass) noun	How much **milk** do we have?	some milk, a lot of milk
	How much **hair** do you have?	some hair, not much hair

General Versus Specific

If English is not your first language, it is tempting to copy the article-noun patterns you see in other people's writing. There is a problem with this strategy, however. A noun can be general or specific (and, consequently, need a different article) depending on where it appears in a block of writing. Where you place it and where another writer has placed it will probably differ.

Usually, a noun is general "the first time" it is mentioned (Pinker, 2014, p. 154). Any of your introductory sentences, then, may have a few indefinite articles (i.e. "a" or "an") in them. You may talk about "a" method, "a" strategy, "a" case study, or "an" intervention. The next time you refer back to this item it becomes specific, and you will use "the" (or "this") in front of the noun.

| General noun – first mention | This research project, a single case **study** involving Participatory Action Research (PAR), is an intervention **measure**. |
| Specific noun – already mentioned | The **intervention** embraces translanguaging. |

There are at least two other ways a noun can become specific apart from it being old information (or something already introduced). The noun could be the only one in its category (it refers to something unique) or it could be attached to a qualifying phrase (that sets it apart as distinctive) (Azar, 1989, p. 193; Yule, 2004, pp. 27 & 37). Have a look at the following examples. **Moon** is unique because our planet has only one of them. **Building**, in this sentence, is unique because only one can be the tallest.

Specific noun – refers to something unique	The **moon** is bright. The tallest **building** in Perth.
Specific noun – <u>qualifying phrase</u>	The **house** <u>over there</u>. The skinny, decaf, **coffees** <u>that she makes</u> are amazing!

Putting It All Together

The following tables based on material from Azar (1989) and Yule (2004) combine all these concepts. The zero affix (∅) means no article is needed.

	singular count noun	singular noncount noun	plural count noun	plural noncount noun
GENERAL a / an	She has a business here.	∅ weather ∅ Business is booming!	∅ cats	∅ furniture
SPECIFIC the	The business is running well. (already mentioned)	the weather today	the cats she feeds	the furniture in this shop

	1-word proper noun	>1-word proper noun	1-unit countries	>1-unit countries	objects/ places	unique (only 1)
GENERAL a / an	∅ John	∅ Ali Dench	∅ Japan	-	There's a bank over there.	-
SPECIFIC the	the John in my class	the Ali Dench at Sheridan	the Japan of the 1940s	the UK the USA the Philippines	She went to the bank. (already mentioned)	the hardest the worst the sun

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