In English, nouns are indicated by articles. Articles are essentially adjectives, because they modify or describe the nouns they precede. There are two articles in English: THE and A/AN. Their distinctions and uses are outlined in the table below.

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<th>Definition/Usage for ‘The’</th>
<th>Definition/Usage for ‘A/An’</th>
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| ‘The’ is referred to as the definite article. We use it to modify or refer to specific nouns. | ‘A/An’ is referred to as the indefinite article. We use it to refer to modify or refer to non-specific nouns. | 1. Let’s review the proposal: This sentence implies that we are referring to a specific proposal, one that the listener(s)/reader(s) are familiar with.  
2. Let’s review a proposal: This sentence implies that we are referring to any proposal. |
| ‘The’ is also used to refer to a specific member of a group | ‘A/An’ is also used to refer to a non-specific member of a group. | 1. We’ve just attended the most interesting lecture in our faculty: This sentence implies that there are many lectures in our faculty, but one particular lecture is the most interesting.  
2. We’ve just attended an interesting lecture at our faculty: This sentence implies that there are many interesting lectures in our faculty, and we attended one of them. |
| Using ‘A’ or ‘An’ depends on the sound of the word either article immediately precedes. | 1. ‘A’ + singular noun that begins with a consonant: a book, a plan, a thesis, a ruler  
2. ‘An’ + singular noun that begins with a vowel: an inference, an angle, an agenda, an ellipse  
3. ‘A’ + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: a university (sounds like ‘yoo-iversity’: it sounds like it begins with a consonant ‘y’ sound), a user, a unicorn  
4. ‘An’ + ‘h’ when it is pronounced in words like ‘historical’: an historical moment in time  
5. ‘An’ + acronym that begins with a vowel sound: An ELD workshop was held this evening at the Writing Centre.  
6. ‘An’ + acronym that begins with a consonant letter, but has a vowel sound: Philip has won an MVP award for his strong effort on the UTSC basketball team.  
7. ‘A’ or ‘AN’, depending on the initial sound of an adjective that modifies a noun: a broken electric fan; a unique design; an unusual situation; a frustrating experience |
The definite article is used when referring to specific or particular nouns. ‘The’ indicates that the noun refers to a specific category or member of a group: it is definite.

1. The professor who taught me in first year is also teaching me this year: This sentence implies that ‘professor’ is someone specific – namely someone I already know and who holds a specific meaning in my life.
2. David handed me the map of the small town we were in: In this sentence, ‘the map’ implies that there is only one map that was created for this town. ‘The town’ implies the specific town that David and I are in at the moment.

‘The’ can be used with non-count nouns, or it can be omitted altogether.

‘A/An’ can only be used count nouns

1. Susan loves to ski on the newly-fallen snow: She is skiing on a specific snowy area.
2. Susan loves to ski on newly-fallen snow. (‘snow’ is a non-count noun).
3. David would like to buy a new car.
4. David needs a job after losing his old one. (‘car’ and ‘job’ are count nouns)

‘The’ is used with specific geographical terms.

Do not use ‘the’ before:
1. names of most countries/territories: Canada, France, Greece, China, India, Iran, Taiwan (except, ‘the Netherlands’, ‘the Dominican Republic’, ‘the Philippines’, ‘the United States’)
2. names of cities, towns, or states: Tokyo, Miami, Karachi, Ontario, Kansas
3. names of lakes and bays: Lake Ontario, Lake Michigan, Penobscot Bay (except a group of lakes: the Great Lakes)
4. names of mountains: Mount Everest, Mount McKinley (except with ranges of mountains: the Andes, the Rockies; or with unusual names: the Matterhorn)
5. names of continents: Europe, Asia
6. names of islands: Easter Island, Prince Edward Island (except with island chains: the Aleutians, the Hebrides, the Canary Islands)
7. Do use ‘the’ before:
8. names of rivers, oceans, and seas: the Nile, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Three Gorges, The Yellow, the St. Lawrence
9. specific points on the earth: The Equator, The North Pole, The South Pole
11. Deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: the Sahara, the Gulf of Mexico, The Black Forest, The Iberian Peninsula

Omission of Articles

There are some common nouns that do not take an article. These include:
1. names of languages and nationalities: Japanese, Indian, Canadian, English, Swahili
2. names of sports: volleyball, hockey, basketball, tennis, soccer
3. names of academic subjects: mathematics, biology, history, sciences, literature

Definitions/Information on articles adapted from ‘The Owl at Purdue’ website: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/printable/540/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/printable/540/) Examples adapted from the ACE Workshops, Engineering Communication Program, University of Toronto.