

# The article system

Easy question: *How many articles are there in English?*

Easy answer: 3.

Less easy question: *What are they?*

Less easy answer: *a(n), the* and  $\emptyset$  (the zero article).

## Rule 1

Decide what you are talking about. There are **only** three choices:

1. One of many – indefinite specific reference
2. All of them, everywhere – generic reference
3. This one exactly – definite specific reference

## Rule 2

In each of these categories, there's a choice of which article to use.

If we are talking about indefinite but specific reference (**one of many**), we can have, e.g.,

*A man came in* or *Men came in*

*Good furniture is expensive*

If we are talking about generic reference (**all of them, everywhere**), we can have

*A car is useful in the country*

*Cars pollute* or *Petrol is expensive*

If we are talking about indefinite and specific reference (**this one exactly**), we can have

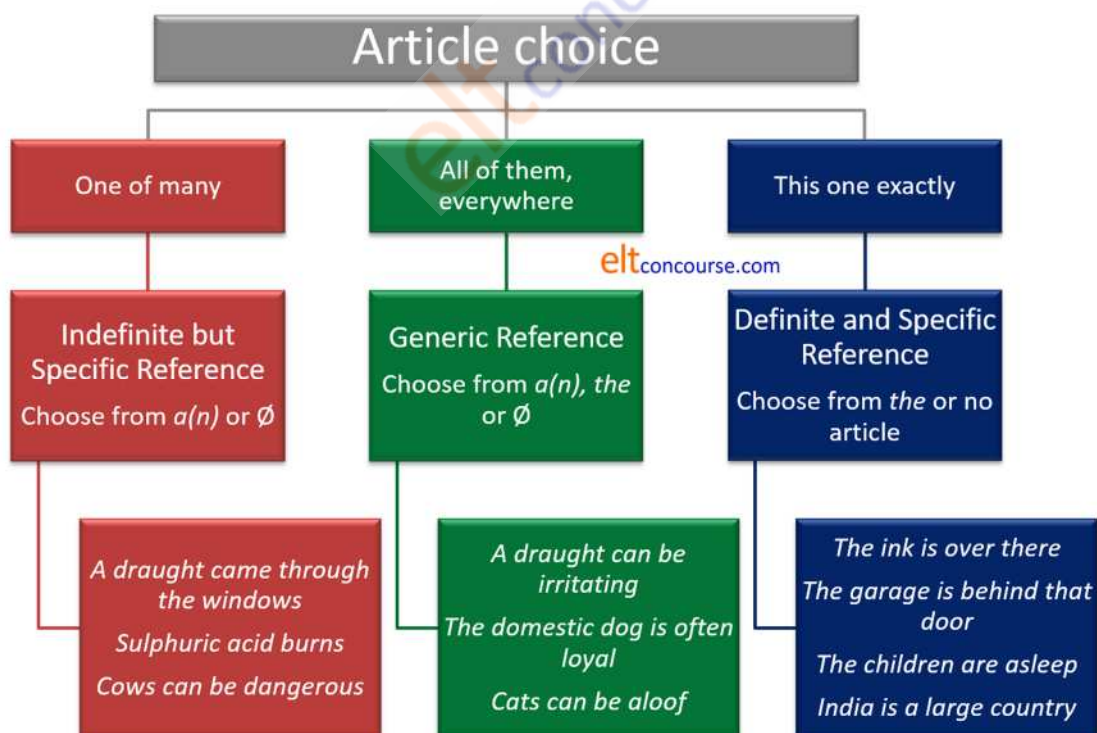
*The car is outside*

*The sugar is in the cupboard*

*The cars are here*

*Great Britain is an island*

Here's the picture so far:



### Rule 3

It matters if the noun is countable or uncountable, singular or plural.

#### Indefinite but specific reference (one of many)

1. If you use indefinite but specific reference and want to talk about **one of many uncountable things** such as *acid* or *types of furniture* you use the zero article  $\emptyset$ . So you have, e.g.,  
*Accurate information is difficult to get, Brown sugar is better in coffee*  
etc.
2. If you use indefinite but specific reference and want to talk about **one of many countable things** such as *tigers* or *chairs*, you use *a(n)*. So you have, e.g.,  
*I don't want to meet a tiger in the forest*  
*I need a chair to sit on*  
etc.
3. If you use indefinite but specific reference and want to talk about **many countable things** such as *tigers* or *chairs*, you use the zero article  $\emptyset$ . So you have, e.g.,  
*Tigers are dangerous*  
*Chairs are not usually dangerous*  
etc.

#### Generic reference (all of them, everywhere)

1. If you use generic reference and want to talk about **all uncountable things** such as *money* or *water*, you use the zero article  $\emptyset$ . So you have, e.g.,  
*Money makes the world go round*  
*Water is essential to life on earth*  
etc.
2. If you use generic reference and want to talk about **all countable things in the plural** such as *tigers* or *chairs*, you use the zero article  $\emptyset$ . So you have, e.g.,  
*Tigers are large animals*  
*Chairs are everywhere*  
etc.
3. If you use generic reference and want to talk about **one countable thing in the singular** as representative of all such as *unicorn* or *wheel*, you use either:
  - the definite article *the*. So you have  
*The wheel is a key invention*  
*The unicorn is a mythical beast*  
etc.
  - the indefinite article *a*. So you have,  
*A dog can be a useful companion*  
*A tiger will attack if threatened*  
etc.

#### Indefinite and specific reference (this one exactly)

1. If you use indefinite and specific reference and want to talk about **one amount of a particular mass thing** such as *acid* or *sugar*, you use the definite article *the*. So we have, *The sugar is behind the flour, The acid is on the bench* etc.
2. If you use indefinite and specific reference and want to talk about **more than one countable thing** such as *tigers* or *cars*, you use the definite article *the*. So we have, *The tigers are upstairs, The cars are in the driveway* etc.
3. If you use indefinite and specific reference and want to talk about **one countable thing** such as *tiger* or *car*, you use the definite article *the*. So we have, *The tiger is behind you, The car is on the road* etc.
4. If you use indefinite and specific reference and want to talk about **one particular proper noun** such as *Berlin* or *Mary*, you use no article. So we have, *Mary has arrived, It's raining in Berlin* etc.

The big picture:

