English Articles

The – refers to a particular or definite thing; it can be used with a singular or plural noun.

- “The pencils need sharpening.” (referring to a specific group of pencils)
- “The blue pencil is my favorite.” (a particular pencil)

The can be used with uncountable nouns (nouns that cannot be counted) or it can be omitted depending on whether you are referring to a particular example of the noun. Some uncountable nouns are: grass, air, information.

- “I like to run in the grass.” (some specific area of grass)
- “I like to run in grass.” (any grass)
- “The book provided information on the subject of horses.” (information in general, not specific)
- “The information contained in the book was helpful.” (specific information)

Nouns that refer to qualities or concepts do not take an article: justice, peace, liberty.

- “Justice prevailed in the case.”
- “We sought peace in the region.”

But if you add an adjective before the concept noun it becomes a noun that specifies something:

- “The truce brought an uneasy peace.” (refers to a specific peace)

A/An – refers to non-particular or indefinite nouns. The first time a noun is introduced use a/an, then when you refer to that same noun again use the.

- “A pencil is a useful tool.” (any pencil, not a particular one)
- “An apple is a good snack.” (any apple not a specific one)
- “I want a bookshelf in my room. Then I can organize my books and magazines on the bookshelf.” (use “a” the first time you use the noun, then “the” afterwards.)
Some examples of when to use a/an:

“a” precedes a noun beginning with a consonant: a dog, a book, a tree
“an” precedes a noun beginning with a vowel: an orange, an octopus, an interest

However:

“an” is used with nouns that start with a silent “h”: an hour
“a” is used with nouns that start with an “h” that is pronounced: a house
“a” precedes a singular noun that starts with a “u” but sounds like a “y” (yoo): a university, a user.

Some nouns don’t use an article: names of languages and nationalities, sports, and school subjects.

“English is spoken in America.”
“Football is a popular sport in Iowa City.”
“I enjoy studying history.”

With countries don’t use “a” if the country’s name is singular: “England” not “the England”, but use the with plural names of countries: “The United States,” “The Netherlands,” “The Soviet Union.”

Names of mountains and rivers also take “the” because they refer to specific ones: the Amazon, the Mississippi, etc.

Additional resources:
A guide to learning English, Frankfurt International School: http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/article.htm (quizzes available)
The Purdue Owl online: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/ (complete resources)