Grammar Explanation

When to use a/an or the

- Use a, an, or the before singular count nouns (nouns that you can make plural).

- Use a or an when the reader does not know which particular person or thing you are referring to, or when you are referring to one of many possible people or things.
  
  o Example: He had a good English teacher.
  (We don’t know which particular English teacher the writer is referring to.)

  o Example: Writing a journal is a good way to improve writing skills.
  (Writing a journal is one of many ways to improve writing skills.)

- Use the when the reader knows which particular person or thing you are referring to.

  o Example: The situation that homeless families in New York are facing is serious.
  (The words that homeless families in New York are facing tell the reader which particular situation is being referred to.)

  o Example: The article provides a good explanation about the causes of the war. The explanation focuses on economic factors.
  (The reader knows that the particular explanation the writer is referring to is the explanation mentioned in the previous sentence.)

- Also use the when there is only one possible person or thing that you could be referring to.

  o Example: Good judgment is the most important quality for a presidential candidate to have.
  (Only one quality can be the most important.)

Excerpted from: Nouns and Articles: Exercise 5