

Articles

A/an and the: meaning

A/an and *the* are articles. They are a type of determiner and they go before a noun.

A/an before a noun shows that what is referred to is **not already known** to the speaker, listener, writer and/or reader (it is the **indefinite article**):

*Do you have **a** car?*

A: *Do you live in **a** house?*

B: *No, actually, I live in **an** apartment.*

The before a noun shows that what is referred to is **is already known** to the speaker, listener, writer and/or reader (it is the **definite article**):

*Where did we park **the** car?* (The speaker and the listener know what car is being referred to.)

*We had to paint **the** apartment before we sold it.* (The speaker and the listener know what apartment is being referred to.)

The makes a noun specific.

Compare

<i>Have you been to an ice rink?</i>	The speaker is not asking about any one specific ice rink but is asking whether they have been to any ice rink (<i>an</i> doesn't refer to a specific ice rink)
<i>Have you been to the ice rink?</i>	The speaker and listener know the ice rink which is being referred to (e.g. the one in their town/the local one). <i>The</i> makes the noun <i>ice rink</i> specific.

Not specific	Specific ('the one you and I know')
<i>Would you like an apple?</i>	<i>Would you like to try the apple pie?</i>
<i>Do you have a cat?</i>	<i>Have you seen the cat?</i>

When do we use (a) and when do we use (an)?

In speaking, we use (**a**) before a consonant sound:

a car; a house; a big truck; a wheel; a grey day

Warning:

Some words that begin with a vowel letter in writing have a consonant sound:

/ə ju: 'naɪtɪd .../ /ə ju:ni 'vɜ:sɪti/ /ə wʌn .../

a united group a university a one-year-old child

We use (**an**) before a vowel sound:

an apple an old shoe an orchestra an umbrella

Warning:

Some words that begin with a consonant letter in writing have a vowel sound:

<i>/ən aʊə(r)/ an hour</i>	<i>/ən empi:θri: .../ an MP3 player</i>
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A/an and the with types of nouns

1. We only use (a/an) with singular countable nouns:

*I have **a** sister and **a** brother.*

*That was **an** excellent meal.*

2. We can use (the) with singular and plural countable nouns:

The tree fell.

The trees fell.

3. We DON'T use (a/an) before uncountable nouns:

*Could I have **rice** instead of potatoes with my fish?*

Not: ~~Could I have **a rice**~~

*I hope we have **nice** weather.*

Not: ~~I hope we have **a nice** weather.~~

4. We can use (the) before uncountable nouns:

*The **rice** we bought in the Thai shop is much better than the supermarket rice.*

*The **weather** was awful last summer.*

The Indefinite Article (a/an)

The indefinite article is used with singular count nouns in the following instances:

1. To refer to **a person or thing** that is **mentioned for the first time** in a conversation or a piece of writing

A man was seen driving away a white Mazda.

Yesterday, when I was walking in the street, I saw a man with a dog. The man ...

2. To refer to **a person or thing** that there is **no enough information about**

A woman called to see you this afternoon.

There was a telephone call for you a minute ago.

3. In definitions (description or classification)

The spider is a small creature with eight thin legs.

My uncle is a kind person.

The whale is a mammal.

4. To refer to a profession

She's a gardener.

He's an ambulance driver.

The Definite Article (the)

1. When it is **clear** which person or thing we mean.

*Open **the window/ door**, please.*

*How was **the film**?*

2. To **generalize**. A **singular noun** is used for this purpose (or a **plural noun without an article**).

***The seal** is hunted for its fur. (= *the seal species*)*

***The egg** is a very cheap source of nourishment.*

3. When **followed by an adjective used as a noun** indicating nationality or when generalizing about a whole class of people.

***The Arabs** are generous and hospitable people.*

*I think **the rich** should pay more tax and that **the poor** shouldn't pay any.*

***The homeless** were sheltered in the schools.*

4. We use *the* with **things known to everyone** (the sun, the stars, the moon, the earth, the planet).

***The earth** moves around **the sun**.*

*We lay on **the grass** and watched **the stars**.*

***The moon** goes around **the earth**.*

5. We can also use **the** with **musical instruments, means of transport, everyday things, and with country(side), seaside, cinema, theatre and radio.**

*Asma can play **the piano**.*

***The violin** sounds different to **the viola**.*

*They always take **the train**. (trains in general not a specific train)*

*I don't buy **the newspaper** these days. It's free on **the Internet**. (things that are part of our daily live. **The** here does not refer to particular things)*

*She was on **the radio** once.*

Not: ~~on radio~~

*There's usually nothing **on TV**. (TV means television)*

*There's usually nothing on **the television**. (less common)*

*I love **the countryside** in spring.*

*Do you go to **the cinema**?*

No Articles

1. We don't use *the* with plural nouns or uncountable nouns when we are referring to things in general:

*We have to protect **wild animals**.* (referring to wild animals in general)

Not: ~~*the wild animals.*~~

*I became obsessed with **computer games**.*

*I've always been interested in **computers**.*

*I don't like **coffee**.* (coffee in general not a specific kind of coffee)

*I love **Japanese food**.* (all Japanese food/Japanese food in general)

Not: ~~*I love the Japanese food.*~~

*I've always believed that **happiness** counts more than money.*

Life's too short.

*Something must be done to reduce the level of **crime** in the area.*

***Money** is important. ~~The money is important.~~*

2. We don't use articles with **continents** (*Asia*), **countries** (*Romania*), **towns** (*Edinburgh*)

3. **Travel**, when you **proceed by**: bicycle, car, bus, train, ship, boat, plane.

*Anna went **by bicycle** but Lucy went **by car**.*

*Philip left **by car** but most of his journey was **by plane**.*

*Paul travelled **on foot** for many kilometres.*

4. We don't use *the* we talk about **months, meals and diseases**.

*My birthday is in **September**.*

***May** is my favourite month of all.*

*Jane had **breakfast** at home.*

*She met Diana for **lunch**.*

*He is dying of **cancer**.*

*The baby has **mumps**.*

***Measles** is a dangerous childhood illness.*

5. Other places where an article is not used:

*I go to **bed** at eleven most nights.*

***Not:** I go to ~~the bed~~ at eleven most nights.*

*Hamad went to **hospital** after he had been to work.*

***Not:** Hamad went to ~~the hospital~~ after he had been to ~~the work~~.*

*Dima was **at home** all day.*

***Not:** Dima was ~~at the home~~ all day.*

*Zena has been kept late **in school** every day.*

***Not:** Zena has been kept late ~~in the school~~ every day.*

*Catherine rose **at dawn** and sent to bed at sunset.*

***Not:** Catherine rose ~~at the dawn~~ and sent to ~~the bed~~ at ~~the sunset~~.*

Compare

<i>Books are so important in my life.</i>	I mean all books in general.
<i>The books were all over the floor.</i>	I mean specific books (that you and I know).

We can make general nouns specific by using an article and adding more information after the noun.

<i>Life is wonderful.</i> (life in general)	<i>The life of a soldier is full of danger.</i> (specifically the life of soldiers, not life in general)
<i>History sometimes repeats itself.</i> (history in general)	<i>He wrote a book on the history of boxing.</i> (specifically the history of boxing)