

General English Language

Instructor: Dr. Mohamed Fathi



King Faisal University

e- Learning Deanship

& Distance Education

Articles: a/an/the



Using Articles

What is an article? Basically, an article is a determiner. Articles specify the reference of a noun with respect to being definite or indefinite.

English has two articles: the and a/an/o. The is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; a/an are used to specify non-specific or non-particular nouns. We call the the *definite* article and a/an the *indefinite* articles.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article

For example, if I say, "Let's read **the** book," I mean a *specific* book. If I say, "Let's read **a** book," I mean *any* book rather than a specific book.



Here's another way to explain it:

The is used to refer to a *specific* or *particular* member of a group.

For example:

*I just saw **the** most popular movie of the year.*

There are many movies, but only one particular movie is the most popular. Therefore, we use **the**.



"A/an"

"A/an" is used to refer to a *non-specific* or *non-particular* member of the group.

For example, "I would like to go to see a movie." Here, we're not talking about a *specific* movie. We're talking about *any* movie. There are many movies, and I want to see *any* movie. I don't have a specific one in mind.



a/an

Generally, we use **a/an** to refer to something for the first time.

For example, “We went to a museum in Paris. We ate at the museum too”.



Indefinite Articles: a and an

"A" and "an" signal that the noun is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. For example:

"My daughter really wants a dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog. We don't know which dog because we haven't found the dog yet.



"Somebody call a policeman!"

This refers to *any* policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.



"When I was at the zoo, I saw an elephant!"

Here, we're talking about a single, non-specific thing, in this case an elephant. There are probably several elephants at the zoo, but there's only *one* we're talking about here.



Remember: using a or an depends on the sound that begins the next word. So...

a + singular noun beginning with a consonant: **a** boy; **a** car; **a** bike; **a** zoo; **a** dog

an + singular noun beginning with a vowel: **an** elephant; **an** egg; **an** apple; **an** idiot; **an** orphan

a + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: **a** user (sounds like 'yoo-zer,' i.e. begins with a consonant 'y' sound, so 'a' is used); **a** university; **a** unicycle



If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between **a** and **an** depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

a broken egg

an unusual problem

a European country (sounds like 'yer-o-pi-an,'
i.e. begins with consonant /j/ sound)



Remember, too, that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a group:

I am **a** teacher. (I am a member of a large group known as teachers.)

Brian is **an** Irishman. (Brian is a member of the people known as Irish.)

Sam is **a** practicing muslim.



Definite Article: the

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. The signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. For example:

"The dog that bit me ran away." Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.



"I was happy to see **the** policeman who saved my cat!"

Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman.
Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's
still a particular policeman because it is the one
who saved the cat.



"I saw **the** elephant at the zoo."

Here, we're talking about a *specific* noun. Probably there is only one elephant at the zoo.



Countable and Noncountable Nouns

The can be used with noncount nouns, or the article can be omitted entirely.

"I love to sail over the water" (some specific body of water)

or

"I love to sail over water" (any water).



"He spilled the milk all over the floor" (some specific milk, perhaps the milk you bought earlier that day)

or

"He spilled milk all over the floor" (any milk).



"A/an" can be used only with count nouns.

"I need a bottle of water."

"I need a new glass of milk."

Most of the time, you can't say, "She wants a water," unless you're implying, say, a bottle of water.



Geographical use of the

Do not use the before:

names of most countries/territories: *Italy, Mexico, Bolivia*; **however, the** Netherlands, *the* Dominican Republic, *the* Philippines, *the* United States

names of cities, towns, or states: *Seoul, Manitoba, Miami*

names of streets: *Washington Blvd., Main St.*

names of lakes and bays: *Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie* **except with** a group of lakes like *the Great Lakes*

names of mountains: *Mount Everest, Mount Fuji* **except with** ranges of mountains like *the Andes* or *the Rockies* or unusual names like *the Matterhorn*

names of continents (Asia, Europe)

names of islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West) **except with** island chains like the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or the Canary Islands



Do use the before:

names of rivers, oceans and seas: ***the Nile, the Pacific***

points on the globe: ***the Equator, the North Pole***

geographical areas: ***the Middle East, the West***

deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: ***the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula***



Don't forget to use THE with the following:

The centre, the top, the middle, the bottom, the left, the right, the end of, the beginning of...

The same, the best, the worst...

The sun, the moon, the world, the sky, the sea, the ground, the country...

The police, the fire brigade, the army...

The piano, the guitar, the trumpet, the flute...

The radio (but television, without the)

The doctor, the toilet, the bank, the theatre, the post office, the dentist, the cinema...



Do not use *THE* with the following :

Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Go to work, get to work, be at work, start work, finish work...

Got to school, be at school, start school, leave school...

Go to university, be at university...

Go to church, be in church (or mass)

Go to bed, be in bed

Go to hospital, be in hospital

Go to prison, be in prison

Go home, get home, arrive home, come home, walk home, leave home, be at home, stay at home



Omission of Articles

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

Names of languages and nationalities: *Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian*

Names of sports: *volleyball, hockey, baseball*

Names of academic subjects: *mathematics, biology, history, computer science*

Or Generalization

Mothers are kind to their kids,

Infants are innocent.



In each of the sentences below, you will see a blank. Please choose one of the following articles for each sentence – a, an, the or leave it blank.

1. My father's car is considered to be _____ piece of art.
2. _____ (B/b)eauty is fleeting (short-lived).
3. _____ (A/a)ir in the room was stifling (hot).
4. The doctor told me that I needed _____ operation tomorrow.
5. _____ (I/i)nformation I received was extremely important.
6. _____ (A/a)ir is made up of millions of atoms.
7. My parents could not believe that their dog had peed on _____ carpet.
8. _____ (A/a)pple a day keeps the doctor away.
9. In some cultures _____ dogs are considered man's best friend.
10. My sister decided to cut her hair with _____ scissors.
11. I was bitten by _____ mosquito in the Caribbean.
12. When the horn honked, it scared me and I dropped _____ glass on the floor.
13. In ancient Egypt _____ cat was considered sacred.
14. Is _____ water in Lake Erie safe to drink?



A, An, The, Zero Article

1. Could you please give me _____ piece of cake?
a. an b. two c. a d. many
2. _____ dog is _____ animal.
a. An/a b. An/an c. A/an d. A/a
3. I visited _____ Ahmed last week.
a. an b. the c. a d. **Zero Article**
4. The capital of Saudi Arabia is _____ Riyadh.
a. **Zero Article** b. an c. a d. the
5. I finished _____ unit in English language course.
a. an b. a c. three d. few
6. I take _____ umbrella when it rains.
a. a b. an c. two d. several





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