

English Grammar – Articles: a, an, the

1) The Indefinite Article (a/an)

To facilitate pronunciation, 'a' is used in front of a word that begins with a consonant sound, and 'an' is used in front of a word that begins with a vowel sound.

- Our town has **a** theatre, **a** university, **a** large park and **a** conference hall.
- **An** Englishman always carries **an** umbrella.
- It's **an** old custom – **a** strange old custom.
- It's **a** unanimous decision.
- The coastguard received **an** SOS.
- He spent **an** hour and **a** half standing in line.

In English, the indefinite article is used for professions.

- Mary is **an** architect.
- Peter is **a** doctor.
- I want to be **an** engineer.

The indefinite article can also be used instead of 'per' when describing a rate or speed.

- He earns \$200 **per** day. or He earns \$200 **a** day.
- She swims twice **per** week. or She swims twice **a** week.
- He drove at 60 miles **per** hour. or He drove at 60 miles **an** hour.

Pronunciation

The word "a" can be pronounced in three different ways:

1. ay To emphasize "one":
A: "Can I use one of your computers?" B: I only have **a** computer!
2. á To enunciate clearly:
I intend to take **a** shirt, **a** towel and **a** hat.
3. schwa The most common way:
Would you like **a** drink?

Exercise 1. Choose "a" or "an":

1. It is _____ car.
2. It is _____ old car.
3. It is _____ unique car.
4. John bought _____ MDF table last week.
5. I have been waiting here for half _____ hour.
6. I have two dogs, _____ German Shepherd and _____ Afghan Hound.
7. My two sons work hard. One is _____ engineer and the other is _____ architect.
8. I go to Europe twice _____ year.
9. She calls me at least four times _____ hour.
10. He works in _____ historic part of the town.

2) The Definite Article (the)

The definite article '**the**' is used in front of a noun about which the listener already knows:

- I have two cars – **a** Ford and **an** Audi. **The** Ford is white and **the** Audi is silver.

It is also used when the existence of something is known because of the context:

- Last week a plane crashed, but **the** pilot managed to eject safely.
- Yesterday I put my clothes in **the** washing machine and sat in **the** garden to wait.

The definite article is used for unique things/places/people:

- **the** sun, **the** moon, **the** sea, **the** sky, **the** Arctic Circle, **the** environment, **the** capital of France, **the** Empire State Building, **the** English Channel, **the** White House, **the** Rolling Stones, **the** British Museum, **the** Queen of Denmark, **the** British Army

The definite article is used for superlatives:

- Mount Everest is **the** highest mountain in the world.
- Arnold Schwarzenegger used to be **the** strongest man in the world.

The definite article is used for ordinal numbers:

- I live on **the** tenth floor.
- I was born on **the** twenty-first of June.

The definite article is used to represent a category:

- **The** computer has changed our lives.
- It is up to **the** consumer to decide which one to buy.
- We all have a responsibility to look after **the** frail.
- **The** blue whale is the largest mammal in the world.

The definite article is used for oceans, seas, rivers, mountains, waterfalls, deserts, etc.:

- **the** Pacific Ocean, **the** Mediterranean Sea, **the** Amazon rainforest, **the** Sahara desert, **the** Angel Falls, **the** Thames River, **the** Rocky Mountains

Also for countries with plural or collective names:

- **the** Netherlands, **the** Arab Emirates, **the** United States of America, **the** United Kingdom

Hotels: **the** Hilton Hotel, **the** Savoy, **the** Sheraton

Newspapers: **the** Times, **the** Baltimore Sun, **the** Daily Mail

Spelled acronyms: **the** EU, **the** BBC, **the** UN, **the** FBI, **the** CIA

Decades: I was born in **the** 1950s. **The** 1980s were excellent for music!

Periods of the day: in **the** morning, in **the** afternoon, in **the** evening

Currencies: **the** U.S. dollar, **the** Yen, **the** Euro

Instead of possessive adjectives:

- She was hit on **her** head by a stone. or She was hit on **the** head by a stone.
- Somebody damaged **our** car. or Somebody damaged **the** car.
- I forgot to lock **my** front door. or I forgot to lock **the** front door.

Forms of entertainment:

- I often go to **the** cinema / **the** theatre / **the** circus / **the** ballet / **the** opera.
- I watch **the** TV every evening but I never listen to **the** radio.

When to Omit the Definite Article

Names of countries (not plural or collective names)

- Germany is an important economic power.
- He's just returned from Chile.
- I was born in England.

Languages and Nationalities

- French is spoken in Canada.
- Do you speak German?
- Are you Dutch?
- I love Chinese food.

Meals

- Lunch is at midday.
- I always have wine with dinner.
- Would you like breakfast early tomorrow?

Spoken (not spelled) acronyms

- OPEC
- NATO

People's names:

- John isn't coming to my party.
- Prince William is King Charles' son. (*Compare*: "Prince William is the king's son.")
- Who assassinated President Kennedy?
- I think that Dr. Watson was Sherlock Holmes' friend.

Names of professions:

- Engineering is a useful career.
- He'll probably study medicine.
- Law is something in which I have always been interested.

Sports:

- I love tennis.
- Peter and Jane are playing cricket with their friends.
- I prefer volleyball to basketball.

Years:

- 1948 was a wonderful year.
- Do you remember 1995?

Uncountable and abstract nouns:

- The main food in Asia is rice.
- Milk is often added to tea in England.
- Money isn't everything.
- Crime is a growing problem in cities.

Mountains, lakes and islands:

- **Mount Everest** is the highest mountain in the world.
- She lives near **Lake Windermere**.
- Have you visited **Long Island**?

Named restaurants, towns, cities, streets, stations, parks, squares, bridges, airports, etc.:

- Victoria Station is one mile from here.
- Can you direct me to Bond Street?
- They're flying from Heathrow Airport.
- King Charles lives in Buckingham Palace.
- I love Hyde Park.
- London Bridge is beautiful.

Types of transport:

- I always go to work by bus.
- I never go on foot, only by car.
- British people love to travel by train.

Company Names:

- Bill Gates owns Microsoft.
- I'm flying with Lufthansa.
- I work for Amazon.

With bed, church, court, vacation, home, hospital, prison, work, school, university:

- My son is sick, so he is in bed today.
- I saw Mary in church yesterday.
- I must go to court tomorrow.
- We always eat seafood when we are on vacation.
- Bob prefers to stay at home at night.
- My grandmother is in hospital having an operation.
- John was released from prison yesterday.
- My husband is at work today.
- After graduating from school, he went to university.

A noun containing a letter or number:

- The students have just read **section C**.
- The Chicago train is about to depart from **platform 5**.
- Her flight leaves from **gate 32**.
- He fell asleep on **page 816** of "*War and Peace*".
- She is staying in **room 611**.

Pronunciation

"**The**" can be pronounced in two different ways. We pronounce it "*thuh*" before words that start with a consonant sound, and we pronounce it "*thee*" before words that start with a vowel sound. This facilitates pronunciation, as we automatically put a 'y' sound in front of the next word.

Consonant sounds: **The** book is on **the** table. **The** concert was excellent.
(*thuh book*) (thuh book) (*thuh concert*)

Vowel sounds: **The** end of the film. **The** apple and **the** orange are different colours.
(*thee yend*) (thee apple) (*thee orange*)

Suggested video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKZSvtf9D_I (13 mins)

Exercise 2. Choose 'the' or leave blank:

- _____ Mount Everest
- _____ Savoy Hotel
- _____ Amazon rainforest
- _____ London
- _____ Catholic church
- _____ Zoo
- _____ London Zoo
- _____ Regent Street
- _____ airport
- _____ Heathrow Airport
- _____ United Kingdom
- _____ Australia
- _____ Atlantic Ocean
- _____ USA
- _____ Cambridge University
- _____ Nile river
- _____ Buckingham Palace
- _____ Netherlands

Exercise 3. Choose 'the' or leave blank:

1. I like listening to _____ radio.
2. She's learning Italian at _____ university.
3. He was sent to _____ prison for theft.
4. I like _____ Indian food.
5. Can I speak to _____ manager, please?
6. Do you like _____ Danish pastries?
7. We went for a walk in _____ St. George Park.
8. She was born in _____ France.
9. Do you often go to _____ church?
10. Let's go to _____ Paris.
11. I'm going to _____ bed.
12. She's gone to _____ work.
13. I don't go to _____ theatre very often.
14. What did you have for _____ dinner?
15. I'm going to _____ bank to get some cash.
16. I'll take you to _____ airport.
17. He's in _____ trouble.
18. It's the first road on _____ right.
19. Have you had _____ breakfast yet?
20. I play _____ football every weekend.