

Help With: Articles *A* and *The*

Few things are as frustrating to a learner of English as the indefinite and definite articles *a* and *the*, mostly because many languages don't have them, and most are not as particular in their usage as English is. Don't feel overwhelmed—native speakers make mistakes with them too. Over time it's possible to develop a sense for which one to use.

The general idea is as follows:

No article: You mean something as a general group.

A: You mean one object out of a possible group, or one the audience doesn't know.

The: You mean one specifically object, real or abstract, and the audience knows which object you mean.

A comes from Old English *one*, and suggests “one out of many.” Words for Old English *that* also led to *the*. If it helps, think of *the* as a visual word. When you are pointing to something, *that bus*, the other person can see what you are pointing to. *The* works in much the same way.

Examples:



Ducks like to swim.

There is no article here because we are talking about ducks generally. We need an *s* because we are talking about them in plural.



There is *a* duck in my bathtub.

Use *a* because we are talking about one duck out of millions of possible ducks. We don't say “I saw a moon” because there is only one visible; it's not in a group. *A* is related to the word *one* in Old English.



***The* duck quacked all night.**

We mean one duck, and one the audience knows about (you can say “the sun is hot” without saying “there is a sun” first because it's obvious). The *the* means one specific thing. *The* is related to *that* in the English language of the middle ages—if we say “look at that mouse!” we can see which mouse is meant.

Now let's look at articles in more detail.

1. Use *no* article

- With proper names.
 - *I met with Dr. Jones.*
- When you are referring to things in a group generally.
 - *Elephants are my favorite animals.*
- With the names of subjects, languages, and countries.
 - *We are learning Spanish from a teacher from Mexico.*

2. Use *a*

- When you are talking about a single example of something
 - *I fed a cat today.* (It could be any cat.)
 - *Would you please hand me a pen?* (I don't care which pen; any pen will do.)

- *Sunny is a teacher.* (A shows membership in a group. Sunny is one of many teachers.)
- *There is an elephant in my bed.* (Use *an* before a vowel sound)

3. Use *the*

- When you are talking about a specific something in the group that the hearer knows.
 - *The duck I fed was fat and brown.* (This duck is specific. It is not any duck but *the* duck you fed.)
 - *Sunny is the best teacher in the school.* (Sunny is not just any teacher. She is the best teacher. Only one of something can be the best.)
- After you have identified something the hearer doesn't know about.
 - *We ate at a Chinese restaurant last night. The restaurant was crowded.* (A first sentence is necessary to establish the restaurant in the hearer's mind.)
 - *The sun was hot today.* (This is fine because it's obvious; we can only see one sun.)
- Use *the* with a single group (this is confusing, but try to think of a group as *one* group).
 - *We saw the new alligators at the zoo.* (We didn't see just any alligators. We saw the new ones.)
 - *The box of computer parts is heavy.* (The *box* is *one* thing, even if it contains many things.)
- Use *the* when you are talking about the *idea* of something.
 - *The dog is a very loyal animal. The computer has changed the world.* (You symbolically mean the idea of all dogs, or all computers.)



Problems & Exceptions

I'm going home. I'm going to school. He was sent to prison.

Old English used fewer articles and prepositions, and so some very traditional statements which suggest a kind of action or process still don't have an article. *Home* doesn't even need a *to*. Common places which don't need an *a* or *the* include I'm going to—church, school, work, dorm, bed, prison, university. The British still say “going to hospital.”

- Don't use *the* with the names of countries, cities, continents, lakes, or mountains.
- Do use *the* with the names of rivers, oceans, seas, geographic areas, deserts.
- A country which is a group of islands or states does take *the*: The USA, The Philippines.
- Universities often take *the*: The University of Nevada—but not with the acronym: “I go to UNLV”—or with universities based on names: Stanford University.

Examples: Japan, the Mississippi River, Asia, the Pacific Ocean, Lake Superior, Mount Charleston, the Mojave Desert, the Middle East, the Amazon.



A Few More Rules

- A count noun can be singular or plural. It is something that can be counted.
 - *I like to eat tacos. I can eat only one taco. My girlfriend can eat three tacos.*
- An uncountable noun does not have a plural form. Uncountable nouns are usually substances, liquids, or an abstract idea. They cannot be counted.
 - *I like to eat rice. I can eat a lot of rice.* (But I can't eat three rice)
- *A* and *an* can be used with countable nouns, but not with uncountable ones.
 - *I am sitting on a chair.* (☒ Not “I am sitting on a furniture.”)
- *The* may be used with either.
 - *The chairs are brown. The snow is falling. The beer is warm.*