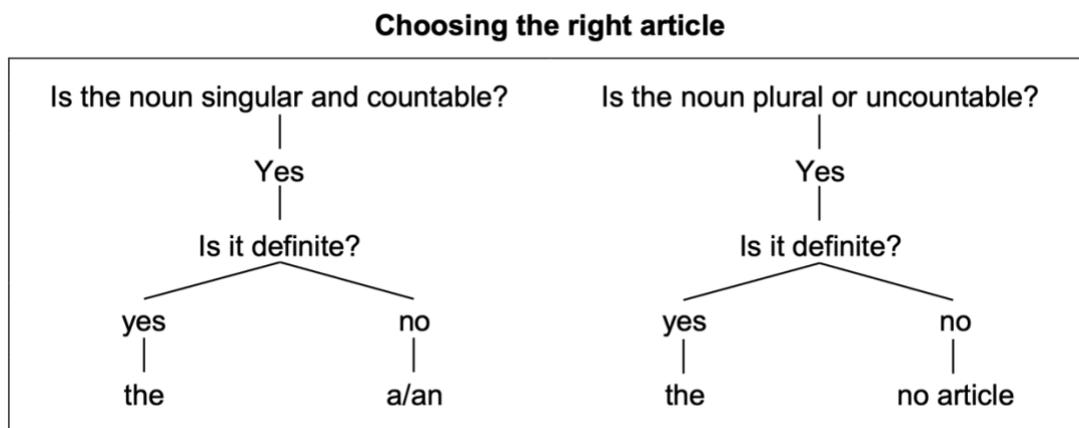


# Articles in English Grammar

The words 'a', 'an' and 'the', known as articles, present problems for most speakers of English as an additional language. This is not surprising, since there is no equivalent construction in many languages, and those languages that do have articles do not necessarily use them in the same way as English.

## 1. Introduction

It is often difficult to decide whether an English noun needs an article before it, and, if so, which article (a/an/the) to use. The main things to consider when choosing an article are whether or not the noun is countable, and whether it is definite. Whether a noun is definite or indefinite depends on whether you and your reader or listener both know what you are referring to. When you have to decide whether to use an article, and which article to use, consider this chart:



### For Example

- I bought a book: "book" is a singular, countable noun; therefore it has to have an article. Your reader does not know which book you are referring to, therefore it is 'indefinite'.
- The book I bought is interesting: "book" is again a singular, countable noun; therefore it has to have an article. In this case, we know which book you are referring to (the book you bought), so it takes a definite article.
- I like the books you gave me: "books" is a plural noun. It is used in a definite sense (we know which books – the books you gave me), so it takes a definite article.
- I like books: "books" is a plural noun. It is used about books generally, not specific books, so it takes no article.
- Blood is thicker than water: blood and water are singular, uncountable nouns. They are used in a general sense; therefore, they do not need an article.
- I bought two books: you do not need an article, because you already have the word two.
- I bought some books: you do not need an article, because you already have the word some.

**The definite article, used before a singular or plural noun. To show people that they know (or they will soon know) what we are talking about.**

The definite article, the, can refer backwards in a conversation or text to something already mentioned.

... my sister there hid a little parcel in my suitcase, so when I was unpacking **the** case, I had a really cool surprise ...

It can also refer forwards to something which is going to be mentioned or explained.

- Could you bring me **the** knife which you gave me?
- **The** friend of hers who's looking after us ...

**Does the always refer backwards or forwards?**

No, it can also refer to shared knowledge or general knowledge. Both the listener and the speaker (or the writer and the reader) know what is being referred to.

- I think Mum is hoping to see her friend at **the** bus stop.

## 2. How do you know whether you need an article and which article to use?

A single, countable noun must have an article if there is no other number, determiner or possessive (e.g. two, our, this). If the noun is plural, an article may not be necessary.

Look first at your noun:

- Our house: you do not need an article, because you already have the possessive our.
- This year: you do not need an article, because you already have the determiner this.
- Car: you need an article, because this is a singular countable noun with no determiner already.
- Trees : you may need an article, depending on whether the noun is definite or not.

**For example:**

- Trees are usually green: no article is needed, because you are talking generally and the noun is not definite, i.e., you are not talking about specific trees.
- The trees in the park are green: the article is needed because you have specified which trees you are talking about.

### 3. Indefinite article (a/an)

If the noun is singular and countable, and this is the first time you have mentioned it, then you will usually need the indefinite article:

I bought a book – we do not know which book.

There is a bird outside – we do not know anything about the bird.

Measurements and rates also take the indefinite article:

-Three times a week.

-Once a month.

If your reader or listener understands what you are referring to, then you will usually need the definite article:

- I bought a book last week. The book is about trees.

(You have just mentioned the book, so you both know which one.)

- We went to a wedding yesterday. The bride wore a lovely dress.

(You have not mentioned the bride before, but you both know she is connected to the wedding.)

Some things are taken to be common knowledge in English and therefore take the definite article:

- **Decades:** He was born in the 1920s.
- **Currencies:** The dollar is getting stronger against the pound.
- **Superlatives and ordinals:** The second book in the series is the best / The chocolate here is the best in the world.
- **Oceans, seas and many rivers:** The Nile flows into the Mediterranean.
- **Mountain ranges:** The Alps.
- **Deserts:** The Sahara.
- **Islands (groups):** The Bahamas.
- **Plural or 'united' countries** – The Maldives are much smaller than the United States of America.
- Adjectives used as nouns – The poor will always be a challenge for the rich in any country.
- **Many organisations and Political institutions** -The World Health Organization has a detailed definition of health, The monarchy in England plays an important role in British culture, The government has been slow to react to the crisis.
- **A scientific categorisation:** The zebra is native to Africa.
- **A symbol:** The Merlion is a symbol of Singapore.
- **Unique people, places or things** :The prime minister said she would call a conference on changes affecting the earth's climate.
- **Unique adjectives:** The same people always take the only parking spaces available.

we sometimes use *the* in fixed expressions for musical instruments, entertainment and transport.

- He plays the piano brilliantly.
- They're going to the opera tonight. (also: the cinema, the football, the shops, etc.)
- We took a taxi to the airport. (also: the bus stop, the station, etc.)

Also, we use *the* to talk about groups of people or types of animals or things in general.

The unemployed are asking for more help from the government. (Also: the poor, the old, the homeless, the deaf, etc.)

The wolf is the largest member of the dog family. (formal)

The Swiss watch is an amazing piece of engineering.

### Other word patterns which take 'the':

Specific nouns modified by a relative clause – The paintings (which are) in the gallery

Specific nouns followed by 'of'. This is a very common pattern - The use of this procedure

Plural nouns preceded by 'of' –Some of the paintings were interesting.

#### Common error:

You cannot write most of paintings or none of paintings.

It is either most of the paintings (definite) or most paintings (general).

- Most of the paintings in the exhibition were landscapes. (definite – we know which specific paintings – they are in the exhibition)
- Most paintings nowadays are expensive (general – not specific paintings)

## 4. No article

We do not need an article if a noun is plural or uncountable and it is not definite.

- Women generally live longer than men.
- Articles are difficult to use.
- Paint is hard to remove.

## 5. Exercise

Try this exercise, putting *a/an/the* in the blanks. If there should be no article, then place a \* in the blank.

Mr Coleman was (1) \_\_\_ very fastidious person. He lived three (2) \_\_\_ streets away from us, in (3) \_\_\_ small house with (4) \_\_\_ beautiful garden. Having taken early retirement from his (5) \_\_\_ job as (6) \_\_\_ button counter, he now had plenty of time to worry, and this he did very successfully. He often spent sleepless nights trying to figure out how he could successfully cook both sides of (7) \_\_\_ omelette without it breaking, or how he might achieve better access to (8) \_\_\_ tins at (9) \_\_\_ back of his cupboard. (10) \_\_\_ most of his home was exceptionally neat and tidy, but several loose cables behind (11) \_\_\_ television set bothered him, and he never quite knew what to do with (12) \_\_\_ empty plastic bags. Then, one day, his life changed,

and he began to experience some relief from his anguish. It seemed that other people underwent similar mental trials, for (13) \_\_\_ new catalogue appeared on his doorstep. (14) \_\_\_ catalogue contained solutions for many of his problems, and for others which had not yet given him any cause for concern. There was (15) \_\_\_ set of three egg timers, for example, shaped like (16) \_\_\_ chickens and designed to emit (17) \_\_\_ clucking sound at (18) \_\_\_ end of three, four and five minutes respectively. In this way he could cook (19) \_\_\_ eggs to suit each of his friends individually, and then keep them warm with (20) \_\_\_ specially designed covers which went with the timer, marked '3', '4' and '5' for identification purposes. And (21) \_\_\_ catalogue contained many other wonderful ideas, such as (22) \_\_\_ toaster which could be adjusted to produce different degrees of brownness on (23) \_\_\_ four slices toasted simultaneously.