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## **The Article**

An article is a function word that determines and indicates the reference and degree of specificity (i.e., definiteness) of a noun, which it precedes and modifies. The articles are part of the group of modifiers called determiners.<sup>1</sup> They can be indefinite (**a/an**) or definite (**the**).

### **The Indefinite Article**

The indefinite article is typically used when the referent to a person, thing or object has not been mentioned before, and is assumed to be unfamiliar to the speaker or hearer. E.g., *An intruder has stolen a vase. The intruder stole the vase from a locked case. The case was smashed open.* The indefinite article is the same for all genders: *a man, a woman, an actor, an actress.*

In its unstressed (and normal use) the indefinite article is pronounced /ə/ before consonants and /ən/ before vowels. The form **a** is used before a word beginning with a consonant sound, or a vowel sounded like a consonant. Note that it is the pronunciation, not the spelling, of the following word that determines their form. E.g., *a man, a table, a young man, a word, a university* [ə ju:nɪvɜ:rsəti], *a European* [ə jʊərəpʰiən], *a ewe* [ə ju:], *a DJ*. The form **an** is used before words beginning with a vowel sound (**a, e, i, o, u**) or words beginning with a mute **h**; e.g., *an apple, an egg, an island, an organ, an hour* [ən ʊər], *an heir* [ən ɛər], *an honorable* [ən ʌnərəbəl] *man, an MP* [ən ɛm pi:]. The plural form of phrases with **a/an** can be made with (unstressed) **some** [səm, sm]. E.g., *I've just bought a melon /some melons, an apple /some apples.*

### **The indefinite article is used:**

- a) Before a singular noun which is countable (i.e., of which there is more than one) when it is mentioned for the first time (especially when we are defining it) and represents no particular or specific person or thing. E.g., *A dog is an animal. I see a man. A house has a roof. A cat can catch a mouse.*
- b) Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things (i.e., generic nouns). E.g., *A cow has horns* (i.e., All cows have horns). *An elephant never forgets. A palm tree is usually very tall.*

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<sup>1</sup> Determiners are function words that are used to specify the reference of a noun.

- c) With nouns which are subject complements (including names of *professions*). E.g., *He is a doctor. She is **an** architect. He became a great man. She is a good girl.*
- d) With certain numerical expressions (esp. of quantity and measurement).<sup>2</sup> E.g., *a couple (of), a dozen, half a dozen, a score (20), a gross (144), a hundred, a thousand, a million, a lot of, a great many (students), a great deal of (coffee).*
- e) With expressions of price, speed, ratio, etc. E.g., *fivepence a kilo, tenpence a dozen, sixty kilometres an hour, four times a day, a pound a metre.*
- f) With **few** and **little**:<sup>3</sup>  
*A few* = a small number, or what the speaker considers a small number.<sup>4</sup>  
*A little* = a small amount, or what the speaker considers a small amount.<sup>5</sup>  
**Only** placed before 'a few' or 'a little', as in '**only a few/only a little**', emphasizes that the number/quantity really is small - in the speaker's opinion.
- g) In exclamations before singular, countable nouns. E.g., *What a hot day! What a pretty girl! Such a pity!* But when the nouns are plural, no article is used; e.g., *What pretty girls! What big dogs!*
- h) **A** can be placed before *Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms* + surname. In this case, the indefinite article means 'a certain person giving his name as' (i.e., not a known person). E.g., *a Mr. Smith, a Mrs. Smith, a Miss Smith, a Ms Taylor*. Thus '**a Mr. Smith**' means 'a man called Smith' and implies that he is a stranger to the speaker.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note: **a/an** and **one** are not usually interchangeable. For example, '*a handkerchief*' means any handkerchief, no particular handkerchief, while '*one handkerchief*' means no more than one. E.g., *A shotgun is no good* (i.e., it is the wrong sort of thing). *One shotgun is no good* (i.e., I need two or three). Also, **a/an** cannot be used as pronouns but **one** can. E.g., *One of my friends. Reserve a table, and try to get one near the door*. Likewise, **one** is used before the words *day, week, month*, etc. to denote a particular time when something happened. E.g., *One day a telegram arrived. One night there was a terrible storm. But a rainy day is very common in England. He spent a night in Paris*. Similarly, **one** cannot replace **a/an** when the latter is used in its generic use; e.g., *A bull terrier makes an excellent watch dog*.

<sup>3</sup> **Few** and **little** can also be used without an article but then they have an almost negative meaning, and can usually be replaced by **hardly any**; e.g., '*We had little time for amusement*' implies that we were always busy. '*Few people know this*' = It is almost unknown.

<sup>4</sup> 'A little time' can mean days or years, depending on the speaker.

<sup>5</sup> 'A few friends' can mean two or three, or twenty or thirty.

<sup>6</sup> 'Mr. Smith', without **a**, implies that the speaker knows Mr. Smith or knows of his existence.

**The indefinite article is not used:**

- a) Before plural nouns; e.g., *dogs*,<sup>7</sup> *apples*.
- b) Before uncountable nouns such as *advice, baggage, furniture information, knowledge, luggage, glass, wood, iron, stone, paper, cloth, wine, coffee, tea, news*, etc.<sup>8</sup> E.g., *I'll give you a piece of advice. There isn't any news. You need some more furniture*. Note: The nouns that refer to materials can also denote one particular thing, and then take an article. E.g., *Windows are made of glass* **but** *Have a glass of wine. We write on paper* **but** *I've got a (news)paper. Iron is a metal* **but** *I use an electric iron*.
- c) Before abstract nouns such as *beauty, happiness, fear, hope, death*, etc., except when they are used in a particular sense.<sup>9</sup> E.g., *He was pale with fear* **but** *Some children suffer from a fear of the dark*.
- d) Before names of meals, except when preceded by an adjective. E.g., *We have breakfast at eight. He gave us a good breakfast*. The article **a/an** is also used when it is a special meal given to celebrate something or in someone's honour, e.g., *I was invited to dinner (at their house, in the ordinary way)* **but** *I was invited to a dinner given to welcome the new ambassador*.

**The Definite Article**

The definite article marks the phrase it introduces as definite, i.e., as 'referring to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer'. The 'something' referred to may be any kind of noun phrase referent: a person (*the girl*), a group of people (*the firemen*), an object (*the lamp*), a group of objects (*the roses*), an abstraction (*the plan*), etc. The definite article adds a certain degree of specificity to the word it precedes. Moreover, the noun determined by **the** may have pre- or postmodification, by which the 'something' identified by **the** may be more precisely specified. E.g., *the tall lamp, the lamp on the table*.

The definite article is the same for singular and plural and for all genders. In its unstressed (and normal) use, the definite article is pronounced [ðə] before consonant sounds and [ði] before vowels sounds.<sup>10</sup> E.g., *the boy, the boys, the girl, the girls, the apple, the apples, the umbrella, the umbrellas*. We generally use **the** when we know or assume that our listener is familiar with and thinking about the same specific thing or person that we are thinking

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<sup>7</sup> The plural of *dogs* can be *dogs* or *some dogs*.

<sup>8</sup> These nouns are often preceded by expressions such as *some, any, a little, a lot of, a piece of*, etc.

<sup>9</sup> When nouns are used in particular senses, they are generally postmodified by prepositional phrases or a relative clause.

<sup>10</sup> Before unstressed vowels, **the** may be pronounced [ði].

about. In other words, given the use of **the** relies on shared knowledge, there are several ways in which the identity of the referent may be determined or 'recovered' by the hearer.

The stressed form of the definite article [ˈði:] is often used to indicate emphasis, excellence or superiority in some respect, or the identity of somebody well-known. E.g., *He would be **the** man for the job. The demonstration will be **the** event this week. You don't mean **the** Professor Hart?*

**The definite article is used:**

- a) Before nouns of which there is only one, or which are considered as one. E.g., *the earth, the sea, the sky, the weather, the North Pole, the Equator, the moon, the zenith, the universe, the cosmos, the Renaissance.*
- b) Before a noun that has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time; e.g., *His car struck a tree; you can still see the mark on **the** tree.*
- c) Before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or relative clause. E.g., ***The** boy that I met. **The** place where I met him. **The** girl in blue. **The** man on the donkey.*
- d) Before a noun which, by reason of locality, can represent only one particular thing. E.g., *Ann is in **the** garden (= the garden of this house). He sent for **the** doctor (= his own doctor). Please pass **the** wine (= the wine on the table).*
- e) Before superlatives, cardinal numbers (*first, second, etc.*) and the word *only*, when they are used as adjectives. E.g., *Mont Blanc is **the** highest mountain in Europe. Most people think that Monday is **the** worst day in the week. I was **the** first person who saw the comet. John is **the** only person who can help you.*
- f) Before singular nouns used to represent a class of objects (i.e., *generic nouns*). E.g., ***The** cuckoo is lazy (= all cuckoos are lazy).*
- g) Before nationality nouns ending in *-ish, -sh, -ch, -ese*.<sup>11</sup> E.g., ***the** Spanish, **the** English, **the** Scotch, **the** Chinese.*
- h) Before nominalized adjectives used to represent classes of persons (i.e., a generic use of the adjective). E.g., *There is no peace for any but **the** dead. **The** old and **the** young should be able to live together.* Other examples: ***The** blind, **the** unemployed, **the** rich as*

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<sup>11</sup> These are **generic nouns**; i.e., they represent a whole class or group of citizens. They are followed by the plural form of verbs. E.g., ***The** Spanish are very lively.*

in *The blind need our help. In this world, the rich get richer and the poor poorer. The unemployed are living in deplorable conditions.*<sup>12</sup>

- i) Before names of some groups of islands, lakes, oceans, canals, rivers, seas, coasts, chains of mountains and names of some countries. E.g., *the Atlantic (Ocean), the Pacific (Ocean), the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Mexico, the Cape of Good Hope, the Strait of Magellan, the Isle of Wight, the Great Lakes, the Wetlands, the Canaries (or the Canary Islands), the Bahamas, the Alps, the Himalayas, the Rockies, the Pyrenees, the Caucasus, the Sierra Nevada, the Midlands, the Orkneys, the Midwest, the Danube, the Euphrates, the Potomac River, the Rhine, the Thames, the USA, the USSR, the Netherlands, the Sudan.*
- j) Before the names of some public institutions such as hotels, restaurants, theaters, museums and the names of newspapers and periodicals. E.g., *the Grand (Hotel), the Waldorf Astoria, the Criterion (Theatre), the Globe (Theatre), the Athenaeum, the Metropolitan Museum, the British Museum, the Bodleian (Library), the Middlesex Hospital, The Economist, The New York Times, The Observer, The Providence Journal.*
- k) Before the names of some historical, political and religious institutions, such as *the Kremlin, the Pentagon, the Koran, the Bible, the Knesset, the Parthenon, the House of Commons, the District of Columbia, the British Broadcasting Corporation (= the BBC), the Ohio State University Press, the American Civil War, the Ford Foundation, the Bush Administration.*
- l) Before the names of musical instruments. E.g., *She learnt to play the flute/the piano, the violin.*
- m) With the names of meals when they are modified by phrases and clauses. E.g., *The dinner given to celebrate their victory cost £200.*
- n) When nouns refer to institutions (e.g., *the theater*) rather than actual buildings, to aspects of mass communication (e.g., *the news, the radio, the television, the paper(s), the press*), or expressions referring to modern transportation and communication (e.g., *the bus, the train, the post, the mail, the telephone*). E.g., *My sister goes to the theater every month. Did you hear the ten o'clock news? What's on the radio this evening? Mary took the bus to London. He promised that the letters would be in the mail this evening.*
- p) With the names of some illnesses and diseases; e.g., *the flu, the measles, the mumps, the hiccups, the jitters, the bends*. However, we use no article with *anaemia, appendicitis, diabetes, influenza, pneumonia*.

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<sup>12</sup> Notice that the verbs that follow these adjectives are in their plural form (e.g., *are, need*), not in their singular third person form.

**The definite article is not used:**

- a) Before the names of countries, towns, and proper names. E.g., *Mr. Jones returned to Wales and bought a house in Swansea.* Exceptions: *the USA, the Sudan, the Netherlands, the USSR, the Mall, the Strand* (in London), *the High Street, the Smiths* (= Mr. and Mrs. Smith and family), *the Joneses* (= Mr. and Mrs. Jones), etc. Note: *The Mr. Smith* would be possible in such sentences as: *I don't want the Mr. Smith who works in the accounts office; I want the other one/the other Mr. Smith.*
- b) Before abstract nouns (e.g., *death, fear, honesty*, etc.) except when they are used in a particular sense. E.g., *Men fear death* **but** *The death of the Prime Minister left his party without a leader.*
- c) After a noun in the possessive case, or a possessive adjective.<sup>13</sup> E.g., *the uncle of the boy* = the boy's uncle. *The (blue) book is mine* = It is my (blue) book.
- d) Before the names of meals, except when the meals refer to particular occasions. E.g., *The Scots have porridge for breakfast* **but** *The wedding breakfast was held in her father's house.*
- e) Before words that denote parts of the body and articles of clothing (Note: such words are normally used with a possessive adjective). E.g., *Raise your right hand. He took off his coat.*

Notice that sentences such as *She seized the child's collar, I patted his shoulder, The brick hit John's face*, could be expressed as *She seized the child by the collar, I patted him on the shoulder, The brick hit John in the face.* Notice also the idiomatic expression: *She looked me in **the** eye and told me the whole story.* The use of **the** is preferred when the reference is to unpleasant conditions of the body, such as aches, pains, wounds. E.g., *He has a cold in the head. You are red in the face. He has spies on the brain.* Similarly in the passive: *He was hit on the head. He was cut in the hand.*

- f) Before indefinite plural nouns. E.g., *Women are expected to like housework (i.e. women in general). Big hotels all over the world are very much the same.* If we put **the** before **women** in the first example, it would mean that we were referring to a particular group of women.
- g) The definite article may be omitted before (appositive) nouns that indicate a unique role or task; i.e., when they imply that only one person holds the particular position. Note: The general tendency is toward not using the article. E.g., *Maureen is (the) captain of the team. John F. Kennedy was (the) President of the United States in 1961. As (the) chairman of the committee, I declare this meeting closed. They've appointed Fred (the)*

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<sup>13</sup> Note that when the possessive case is used, the article before the person or thing possessed disappears. E.g., *the horns of the bull* = the bull's horns.

*treasurer, and no doubt he will soon become (the) secretary. Anne Martin, (the) star of the TV series and (the) author of a well-known book on international cuisine, has resigned.*

**The definite article is also omitted:**

- a) When the word **home** is used alone; i.e., when it is not preceded or followed by a descriptive word<sup>14</sup> or phrase, **the** is omitted. E.g., *He went home. She left home. They got home late. They hurried home. They arrived home after dark.*

Note that the preposition **to** is omitted after **go** and **at** is not used after **arrive**. But when **home** is preceded or followed by a descriptive word or phrase, it is treated like any other noun as regards articles and prepositions. E.g., *We went to the bride's home. For some years this was the home of your queen. A mud hut was the only home he had ever known.*

- b) The words *chapel, church, market, college, school, hospital, court, prison, work, sea, bed* are used without **the** when they are visited or used for their primary purpose. E.g., *We go to church to pray, to market to buy or sell, to school to study, to hospital as patients, to college to study, to prison as prisoners, to bed to sleep, to court as litigants, to sea as sailors, to work as workers.* So we can be *in prison, hospital, court, bed* as prisoners, patients, etc. and *at church, work, sea, market* as worshippers, workers, etc. *We return from work, school, market, church. We get out of bed, leave hospital, escape from prison.*

When these places are not visited for their primary purpose the article **the** is used. E.g., *I went to the church to see the carvings. He comes to the school sometimes to speak to the headmaster. He returned from the prison where he had been visiting his brother. They are at the sea (= at the seaside).* Compare this with: *They are at sea* (in a ship but not necessarily as sailors). *He went to the bed* = walked over to it. Compare with: *He went to bed* = got into it and presumably went to sleep. In contrast to the above list, the following very common nouns always take **the**: *cathedral, office, cinema, theatre*. E.g., *He is at the office (But at work). She is going to the theatre.*

**Zero Article**

We use neither definite nor indefinite article in the following cases:

- a) When nouns refer to means of transportation and communication. E.g., *by bicycle, by bus, by car, by boat, by plane, by train, by radio, by mail, by telephone, by satellite.*

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<sup>14</sup> **Descriptive words** are generally adjectives or phrases used as adjectives such a prepositional phrases and relative clauses.

- b) In some expressions of time that begin with **at**, **by**, **after**, and **before**. E.g., *at dawn, at daybreak, at sunrise, at sunset, at sunup, at sundown, at noon, at midnight, at dusk, at twilight, at night, by night, before morning came, after nightfall, all day long.*
- c) When two singular countable nouns are placed together in parallel structures<sup>15</sup> such as *arm in arm, face to face, hand in hand, day by day, mile upon mile, eye to eye, back to back, teaspoonful by teaspoonful, side by side, from father to son, husband and wife, from right to left, from top to bottom, from west to east, from beginning to end.*
- d) In the following idiomatic expressions: *at home, by hand, on top of, by way of, on foot, in turn, out of step, take advantage of, set fire to, get word of.*
- e) With the names of the days of the week after the preposition **on**; e.g., *on Sunday, on Monday, on Tuesday*, and so on.
- f) With the following nouns after verbs such as **be**, **go**, **walk**, etc. E.g., *be in/go to bed, class, church, college, court, jail, prison, school, sea, town.* There are some nouns that take no article in British English, but in American English such nouns are usually used with **the**. E.g., *to be in/go to hospital, be at/go to university (BrE); to be in/go to the hospital, be at/go to the university (AmE).*
- g) With nouns that refer to titles and professional degrees, such as Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms, Dr., Prof. E.g., *Mr. Smith, Prof. Jones.*
- h) With plural nouns and noncount nouns in their generic use (i.e., when they refer to a whole class of elements rather than individuals). E.g., *Cigarettes are bad for your health. Tigers are becoming almost extinct. Hydrogen is lighter than oxygen. Necessity is the mother of invention. Research shows that the elderly are the prime victims of inflation. Hunger and violence continue to mark the future of mankind/humanity. My favorite subject is history/French/mathematics/music... Happiness is often the product of honesty and hard work. Theory must go hand in hand with practice.*
- i) With the names of languages. E.g., *Spanish, French, English*, etc. But when the names of languages are used before the word *language*, the whole phrase is preceded by **the**. E.g., *the Spanish language, the English language.*
- j) With proper nouns, i.e., the names of specific people, cities, continents, countries, counties, states, lakes, mountains, months, days, festivals, religious celebrations, magazines, and so forth. E.g., *Shakespeare, Milwaukee, Venezuela, Mount Everest, Africa, Lake Huron, Douglas County, September, Monday, Christmas, Vogue.* Exceptions: *The Hague, The Netherlands, The Sahara, The Bronx.* Notice that if the name of a person is preceded by the **a/an**, it means 'a certain person called X but otherwise known'. E.g., *A Mrs. Robertson was trying to contact you this morning.*

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<sup>15</sup> Parallel structure have the form: X + preposition/coordinator + Y.

Similarly, if the name of a person is preceded by stressed **the** [ˈði:], it means ‘the well-known person/place named X’. E.g., A: *I used to know John Lennon quite well.* B: *Surely you can’t mean **the** John **Lennon**?* Likewise, when a surname is made plural and preceded by **the**, it takes on the meaning ‘the family called X’. E.g., *the Wilsons* = the Wilson family.<sup>16</sup>

- k) With kinship terms (e.g., *Mother, Mom, Mommy, Mum, Mummy, Father, Dad, Daddy, Uncle, Aunt, etc.*)<sup>17</sup> when they have a unique reference (i.e., they refer only to our relatives). E.g., *Where’s Mom? Father is here! You’ll see Uncle on Saturday.*
- l) With addresses. E.g., *I live at 2345 Fifth Avenue. I live in/on Bolivar Street. The party will be at 2-34 Lennon Drive.*
- m) In newspaper headlines, labels, notices, and the like.<sup>18</sup> E.g., *Fire kills teenager after hoax.*
- n) With vocatives (or forms of direct address). E.g., *I’ll see you later, mate. No hard feelings, Doctor! Do you want that, baby? Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!*

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<sup>16</sup> Notice that *Henry VIII* and *Queen Elizabeth II* are said with the definite article: ‘*Henry the Eighth*’, ‘*Queen Elizabeth the Second*’.

<sup>17</sup> In writing these kinship terms usually begin with a capital letter.

<sup>18</sup> This form of writing is often known as block language or journalese.