

Topic: Articles

1. **a/an** (the indefinite article)

The form **a** is used before a word beginning with a consonant, or a vowel with a consonant sound:

a man; a lad; a university; a European; a one-way street

The form **an** is used before words beginning with a vowel (**a, e, i, o, u**) or words beginning with a mute **h**:

an apple; an island; an uncle; an egg; an onion; an hour

or individual letters spoken with a vowel sound:

an L-plate; an MP; an SOS; an 'x'

a/an is the same for all genders:

a man; a woman; an actor an actress; a table

2. Use of **a/an**

a/an 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 and represents no particular person or thing:

- *I need a visa.*
- *They live in a flat.*
- *He bought an ice-cream.*

B. Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things:

- *A car must be insured*
- *All cars/Any car must be insured.*
- *A child needs love*
- *All children need/Any child needs love.*

C. With a noun complement. This includes names of professions:

- *It was an earthquake.*
- *She'll be a dancer.*
- *He is an actor.*

D. In certain expressions of quantity:

-a lot of a couple; a great many a dozen (but one dozen is also possible); a great deal of

E. With certain numbers:

a hundred; a thousand

Before **half** when **half** follows a whole number;

1 ½ kilos = one and a half kilos or a kilo and a half

But *½ kg = half a kilo* (no **a** before *half*), though *a + half + noun* is sometimes possible:

a half-holiday a half-portion a half-share

With *1/3, ¼, 1/5 etc.* **a** is usual: *a third, a quarter etc.*, but **one** is also possible.

F. In expressions of price, speed, ratio, etc.:

- *5p a kilo £1 a metre sixty kilometres an hour*
- *10 p a dozen four times a day*

(Here **a/an** = **per**)

G. In exclamations before singular, countable nouns:

*Such a long queue! What a pretty girl! But
Such long queues! What pretty girls!*

- H. **a** can be placed before Mr/Mrs/Miss + surname:
a Mr Smith a Mrs Smith a Miss Smith a Mr Smith

3. Omission of **a/an**

- a/an** is omitted;
- A. Before plural nouns.
a/an has no plural form. So the plural of *a dog* is *dogs*, and of *an egg* is *eggs*.
- B. Before uncountable nouns (see 13).
- C. Before names of meals, except when these are preceded by an adjective:
We have breakfast at eight.
He gave us a good breakfast.

The article is also used when it is a special meal given to celebrate something or in someone's honour:

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.

4.. **a/an** and **one**

A **a/an** and **one** (adjective)

- 1 When counting or measuring time, distance, weight etc. we can use either **a/an** or **one** for the singular:
£1 = a/one pound £1,000,000 = a/one million pounds (See chapter 36.)
But note that in *The rent is £100 a week* the **a** before *week* is not replaceable by **one**

In other types of statement, **a/an** and **one** are **not** normally interchangeable, because **one** + noun normally means 'one only/not more than one' and **a/an** does not mean this:

A shotgun is no good. (It is the wrong sort of thing.)
One shotgun is no good. (I need two or three.)

2. Special uses of **one**

- (a) **one** (adjective/pronoun) used with **another/others**:
One (boy) wanted to read, another /others wanted to watch TV.
One day he wanted his lunch early, another day he wanted it late.
- (b) **one** can be used before *day/week/month/year/summer/winter* etc. or before the name of the day or month to denote a particular time when something happened:
One night there was a terrible storm.
One winter the snow fell early.
One day a telegram arrived.
- (c) **one day** can also be used to mean 'at some future date':
One day you'll be sorry you treated him so badly.
(*Some day* would also be possible.)

B **a/an** and **one** (pronoun)

- one** is the pronoun equivalent of **a/an**:
Did you get a ticket? ~ Yes, I managed to get one.
- The plural of **one** used in this way is **some**:
Did you get tickets? ~ Yes, I managed to get some.

3. **a little/a few** and **little/few**

A. **a little/little** (adjectives) are used before uncountable nouns:

a little salt/little salt

a few/few (adjectives) are used before plural nouns:

a few people/few people

All four forms can also be used as pronouns, either alone or with of:

Sugar? ~ A little, please.

Only a few of these are any good.

B. **a little/a few** (adjectives and pronouns)

a little is a small amount, or what the speaker considers a small amount, **a few** is a small number, or what the speaker considers a small number.

only placed before **a little/a few** emphasises that the number or amount really is small in the speaker's opinion:

Only a few of our customers have accounts.

But **quite** placed before **a few** increases the number considerably:

I have quite a few books on art. (quite a lot of books)

C. **little** and **few** (adjectives and pronouns)

little and **few** denote scarcity or lack and have almost the force of a negative:

There was little time for consultation.

Little is known about the side-effects of this drug.

Few towns have such splendid trees.

This use of **little** and **few** is mainly confined to written English (probably because in conversation **little** and **few** might easily be mistaken for **a little/a few**). In conversation, therefore, **little** and **few** are normally replaced by **hardly any**. A negative verb +

much/many is also possible:

We saw little = We saw hardly anything/We didn't see much.

Tourists come here but few stay overnight =

Tourists come here but hardly any stay overnight.

But **little** and **few** can be used more freely when they are qualified by *so, very, too*.

extremely, comparatively, relatively etc. **fewer** (comparative) can also be used more freely.

I'm unwilling to try a drug I know so little about.

They have too many technicians, we have too few.

There are fewer butterflies every year.

D. **a little/little** (adverbs)

1. **a little** can be used:

(a) with verbs: *It rained a little during the night.*

They grumbled a little about having to wait.

(b) with 'unfavourable' adjectives and adverbs:

a little anxious a little unwillingly

a little annoyed a little impatiently

(c) with comparative adjectives or adverbs:

The paper should be a little thicker.

Can't you walk a little faster?

rather could replace **a little** in (b) and can also be used before comparatives (see 42), though **a little** is more usual. In colloquial English **a bit** could be used instead of **a little** in all the above examples.

2. little is used chiefly with **better** or **more** in fairly formal style:

His second suggestion was little (= not much) better than his first.

He was little (= not much) more than a child when his father died.

It can also, in formal English, be placed before certain verbs, for example *expect*, *know*, *suspect*, *think*:

He little expected to find himself in prison.

He little thought that one day . . .

Note also the adjectives *little-known* and *little-used*:

a little-known painter a little-used footpath

6. the (the definite article)

A. Form

the is the same for singular and plural and for all genders:

the boy the girl the day

the boys the girls the days

B. Use

The definite article is used:

1 When the object or group of objects is unique or considered to be unique:

the earth the sea the sky the equator the stars

2. Before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time:

His car struck a tree; you can still see the mark on the tree.

3 Before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or clause:

the girl in blue the man with the banner

the boy that I met the place where I met him

4 Before a noun which by reason of locality can represent only one particular thing:

Ann is in the garden, (the garden of this house)

Please pass the wine, (the wine on the table)

Similarly: *the postman* (the one who comes to us), *the car* (our car), *the newspaper* (the one we read).

5 Before superlatives and *first*, *second* etc. used as adjectives or pronouns, and only:

the first (week) the best day the only way

C. **the** + singular noun can represent a class of animals or things:

The whale is in danger of becoming extinct.

The deep-freeze has made life easier for housewives.

But man, used to represent the human race, has no article:

If oil supplies run out, man may have to fall back on the horse.

the can be used before a member of a certain group of people:

The small shopkeeper is finding life increasingly difficult.

the + singular noun as used above takes a singular verb. The pronoun is **he**, **she** or **it**:

The first-class traveller pays more so he expects some comfort.

D. **the** + adjective represents a class of persons:

the old = old people in general

E. **the** is used before certain proper names of seas, rivers, groups of islands, chains of mountains, plural names of countries, deserts, regions:

the Atlantic the Netherlands

the Thames the Sahara

the Azores the Crimea

the Alps the Riviera

and before certain other names:

the City the Mall the Sudan

The Hague the Strand the Yemen

the is also used before names consisting of noun + **of** + noun:

the Bay of Biscay the Gulf of Mexico

the Cape of Good Hope the United States of America

the is used before names consisting of adjective + noun (provided the adjective is not *east, west* etc.):

the Arabian Gulf the New Forest the High Street

the is used before the adjectives *east/west* etc. + noun in certain names:

the East/West End the East/West Indies

the North/South Pole

but is normally omitted:

South Africa North America West Germany

the, however, is used before *east/west* etc. when these are nouns:

the north of Spain the West (geographical)

the Middle East the West (political)

Compare *Go north* (adverb: in a northerly direction) with *He lives in the north* (noun: an area in the north).

F. **the** is used before other proper names consisting of adjective + noun or noun + **of** + noun:

the National Gallery the Tower of London

It is also used before names of choirs, orchestras, pop groups etc.:

the Bach Choir the Philadelphia Orchestra the Beatles

and before names of newspapers (*The Times*) and ships (*the Great Britain*).

G. **the** with names of people has a very limited use. **the** + plural surname can be used to mean 'the ... family'.

the Smiths = Mr and Mrs Smith (and children)

the + singular name + clause/phrase can be used to distinguish one person from another of the same name:

We have two Mr Smiths. Which do you want? ~ I want the Mr Smith who signed this letter.

the is used before titles containing **of** (*the Duke of York*) but it is not used before other titles or ranks (*Lord Olivier, Captain Cook*), though if someone is referred to by title/rank alone **the** is used:

The earl expected . . . The captain ordered . . .

Letters written to two or more unmarried sisters jointly may be addressed *The Misses* + surname: *The Misses Smith*.

7. Omission of **the**

A. The definite article is not used:

1 Before names of places except as shown above, or before names of people.

2 Before abstract nouns except when they are used in a particular sense;

Men fear death but *The death of the Prime Minister left his party without a leader*.

3 After a noun in the possessive case, or a possessive adjective:

the boy's uncle = the uncle of the boy *It is my (blue) book = The (blue) book is mine*.

4 Before names of meals (but see 3 C):

The Scots have porridge/or breakfast but The wedding breakfast was held in her/other's house.

5 Before names of games: *He plays golf.*

6 Before parts of the body and articles of clothing, as these normally prefer a possessive adjective:

Raise your right hand. He took off his coat.

But notice that sentences of the type:

She seized the child's collar.

I patted his shoulder.

The brick hit John's face.

could be expressed:

She seized the child by the collar.

I patted him on the shoulder.

The brick hit John in the face.

Similarly, in the passive:

He was hit on the head. He was cut in the hand.

B Note that in some European languages the definite article is used before indefinite plural nouns but that in English **the** is never used in this way:

Women are expected to like babies, (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.

C *nature*, where it means the spirit creating and motivating the world of plants and animals etc., is used without **the**:

If you interfere with nature you will suffer for it.

Exercise:

1. Directions: Fill in the blank with the appropriate article, *a*, *an*, or *the*, or leave the space blank if no article is needed.

1. I want ____ apple from that basket.
2. ____ church on the corner is progressive.
3. Miss Lin speaks ____ Chinese.
4. I borrowed ____ pencil from your pile of pencils and pens.
5. One of the students said, " ____ professor is late today."
- 6 Eli likes to play ____ volleyball.
7. I bought ____ umbrella to go out in the rain.
8. My daughter is learning to play ____ violin at her school.
9. Please give me ____ cake that is on the counter.
10. I lived on ____ Main Street when I first came to town.
11. Albany is the capital of ____ New York State.
12. My husband's family speaks ____ Polish.
13. ____ apple a day keeps the doctor away.
14. ____ ink in my pen is red.
15. Our neighbors have ____ cat and ____ dog

2. Choose a little / little / a few / few:

1. I have _____ water left. There's enough to share.
2. I have _____ good friends. I'm not lonely.
3. He has _____ education. He can't read or write, and he can hardly count.
4. There are _____ people she really trusts. It's a bit sad.
5. We've got _____ time at the weekend. Would you like to meet?
6. Julie gave us _____ apples from her garden. Shall we share them?
7. She has _____ self-confidence. She has a lot of trouble talking to new people.
8. There are _____ women politicians in the UK. Many people think there should be more.
9. It's a great pity, but the hospital has _____ medicine. They can't help many people.
10. I've got _____ cakes to give away. Would you like one?
11. There's _____ milk left in the fridge. It should be enough for our coffee.
12. _____ children from this school go on to university, unfortunately.
13. Do you need information on English grammar? I have _____ books on the topic if you would like to borrow them.
14. She's lucky. She has _____ problems.
15. London has _____ sunshine in the winter. That's why so many British people go on holiday to sunny places!
16. There's _____ spaghetti left in the cupboard. Shall we eat it tonight?
17. There are _____ programmes on television that I want to watch. I prefer to download a film or read a book.
18. He has _____ free time. He hardly ever even manages to call his mother!
19. Unfortunately, I have _____ problems at the moment.
20. Are you thirsty? There's _____ juice left in this bottle, if you'd like it.

