

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 a/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 an apple from that basket.
2. The church on the corner is progressive.
3. Miss Lin speaks - Chinese.
4. I borrowed a pencil from your pile of pencils and pens.
5. One of the students said, "The professor is late today."
- 6 Eli likes to play - volleyball.
7. I bought an umbrella to go out in the rain.
8. My daughter is learning to play the violin at her school.
9. Please give me the 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. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
14. The ink in my pen is red.
15. Our neighbors have a cat and a dog

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

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

