

A/an and one

A

We use **a** before nouns and noun phrases that begin with a consonant sound. If the noun or noun phrase starts with a vowel *letter* but begins with a consonant *sound*, we also use **a**:

- ☐ **a** university (/ə ju:n.../) **a** European (/ə juər.../) **a** one-parent family (/ə wʌn.../)

We use **an** before words that begin with a vowel sound:

- ☐ **an** orange **an** Italian **an** umbrella

These include words that begin with a silent letter 'h':

- ☐ **an** hour **an** honest child **an** honour **an** honorary degree

and abbreviations said as individual letters that begin with A, E, F, H, I, L, M, N, O, R, S or X:

- ☐ **an** MP (/ən em pi:/) **an** FBI agent (/ən ef bi: ai.../) **an** IOU (/ən ai əʊ ju:/)

But compare abbreviations said as words:

- ☐ **a** NATO general (/ə neɪtəʊ.../) **a** FIFA official (/ə fi:fə.../) but **an** OPEC meeting (/ən əʊpek.../)

Notice that we say

- ☐ **a** history (book) but **an** (or **a**) historical (novel)

B

We use **a/an** (not **one**) to talk about a particular but unspecified person, thing or event:

- ☐ I really need **a** cup of coffee.
☐ You never see **a** police officer in this part of town, do you?

We also use **a/an**, not **one**, in number and quantity expressions such as:

- ☐ three times **a** year half **an** hour a quarter of **an** hour **a** day or so (= 'about a day')
50 cents **a** (= each) litre (notice we can also say '50 cents for one litre')
a week or two (= somewhere between one and two weeks; notice we can also say 'one or two weeks')
a few **a** little **a** huge number of...

We use **a** rather than **one** in the pattern **a...of...** with possessives, as in:

- ☐ She's **a** colleague of mine.
☐ That's **a** friend of Bill's.

C

Before a singular countable noun **one** and **a/an** both refer to one thing:

- ☐ We'll be in Australia for **one** year. (or ...**a** year.)
☐ Wait here for **one** minute, and I'll be with you. (or ...**a** minute...)

Using **one** in sentences like these gives a little more emphasis to the length of time, quantity, amount, etc.:

- ☐ He weighs **one** hundred and twenty kilos! Would you believe it! (using **one** emphasises the weight more than using **a**)

However, we use **one** rather than **a/an** if we want to emphasise that we are talking about *only* one thing or person rather than two or more:

- ☐ Do you want **one** sandwich or two?
☐ Are you staying **only one** night?
☐ I just took **one** look at her and she started crying.

We use **one**, not **a/an**, in the pattern **one...other/another**:

- ☐ Close **one** eye, and then the **other**.
☐ Bees carry pollen from **one** plant to **another**.

We also use **one** in phrases such as **one day**, **one evening**, **one spring**, etc. to mean a particular, but unspecified day, evening, spring, etc.:

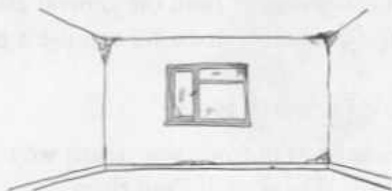
- ☐ Hope to see you again **one** day.
☐ **One** evening, while he was working late at the office...

44.1 Write a or an in the spaces. (A)

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 _____ unpaid bill | 8 _____ U-turn |
| 2 _____ DIY shop | 9 _____ heirloom |
| 3 _____ MA in Russian | 10 _____ NASA space launch |
| 4 _____ Euro | 11 _____ UN decision |
| 5 _____ MiG fighter plane | 12 _____ SOS message |
| 6 _____ Olympic medal | 13 _____ F grade |
| 7 _____ AGM | 14 _____ hero |

44.2 Change a/an or one in these sentences if necessary, or write ✓. In which sentences are both a/an and one possible? (B & C)

- I usually go to the gym four times one week.
- There's more than one way to solve the problem.
- I phoned the council to complain, but just got passed on from a person to another.
- The rate of pay is really good here. You can earn over £20 one hour.
- Maybe we could go skiing one winter.
- The apples are 50 cents one kilo.
- Are you hungry? Would you like one piece of cake?
- The rules say that there is only one vote per member.
- You can get seven hours of recording on one disc.
- 'What would Nick like for his birthday?' 'Why don't you ask Emma? She's one good friend of his and will have some ideas.'
- There's one pen on the floor. Is it yours?
- The library books are due back in one month.
- Do you want some of my chips? There are too many here for a person.
- I'm going to London for one day or two.
- Either I'll work late tonight or I'll come in early tomorrow, but the report's got to be finished by lunchtime a way or another.
- It will take more than one morning to finish the decorating.



44.3 Which is more appropriate, a/an or one? If both a/an and one are possible, write them both. (B & C)

- If you wait _____ second I'll get my coat and come too.
- I want to see the river _____ last time before I leave.
- The Queen is visiting the city _____ day in November.
- It was announced that the plane would be approximately _____ hour late.
- I could hear the sound of _____ helicopter in the distance.
- I'd just like to say _____ thing before I go.
- Martha's baby is _____ year old already.
- Dinner should be ready in _____ hour or so.
- Paul came over _____ evening last week.
- I've painted _____ wall already and I'll do the other tomorrow.
- I'd like to make _____ point here, Ken, if I may.
- _____ large number of people had gathered in the square.

A/an, the and zero article (1)

A We usually use **the** when we talk about things which are unique – there is only one of them (or one set of them):

- ☐ the world the sky the atmosphere the sun the ground the climate the sea
- the horizon the human race the environment the travel industry the arms trade

We also refer to general geographical areas with **the** as in:

- ☐ the beach the country the countryside the town the seaside the forest
- where 'the country' or 'the countryside' means 'the area where there are no towns'. We also talk about:

- ☐ the past the present the future

Notice, however, that some nouns like this can be used with **zero article** (i.e. no article) to refer to a concept in general:

- ☐ **Climate** is one of the many factors involved in changing farming methods. (*or The climate...*)
- ☐ The flowers grow best in sandy soil and **sun**. (= sunshine)
- ☐ In autumn the temperature difference between **land** and **sea** reduces. (*or ...the land and the sea...*)

If we want to describe a particular instance of these we can use **a/an**. Compare:

- ☐ I could see the plane high up in **the sky**. *and*
- ☐ When I woke up there was a **bright blue sky**.
- ☐ What are your plans for **the future**? *and*
- ☐ She dreamt of a **future** where she could spend more time painting.

B We can use **the** when we make generalisations about classes of things using singular countable nouns. (See also Unit 47A.) Compare the use of **the** and **a/an** in these sentences:

- ☐ **The computer** has revolutionised publishing. (this refers to computers in general) *but not* A computer has revolutionised publishing. (computers *in general* have done this, not an individual computer)
- ☐ **The computer** is an important research tool. *and* ☐ A computer is an important research tool. (this statement is true of both the general class and the individual item)

As an alternative to **the + singular countable noun** we can use a plural countable noun to talk about a class of things:

- ☐ **Computers** are an important research tool.

Notice that if **the** is used with plural and uncountable nouns we refer to a specific thing or group:

- ☐ **The computers** have arrived. Where shall I put them?
- ☐ **The music** was wonderful. I could have listened to the orchestra all night.

When we define something or say what is typical of a particular class of people or things, we generally use **a/an** rather than **the**:

- ☐ A corkscrew is a gadget for getting corks out of bottles.
- ☐ A garden is there to give you pleasure, not to be a constant worry.

C Some nouns can be used uncountably when we talk about the whole substance or idea, but countably when we talk about an instance or more than one instance of it. When these nouns are used countably we can use **a/an** (and plurals). Compare:

- ☐ I don't drink coffee. *and* ☐ Would you like a coffee? (= a cup of coffee)
- ☐ She's got blonde hair. *and* ☐ There's a hair in my soup!
- ☐ He shook with fear. *and* ☐ He has a fear of heights.

There are many other nouns like this, including **conversation, grammar, importance, iron, pleasure, shampoo, sound**. (For more see GR:H2 & H3.) Some of these nouns (e.g. **grammar, iron**) have different meanings when they are used countably and uncountably (see GR:H3).

45.1 Choose one of the following words to complete these sentences. Use the same word in each pair.

Add the *or a/an* in an appropriate place. (A)

beach future past world

- 1 a I think the best Australian wine is as good as any in _____.
- b As a child, Ethel would often daydream about travelling forward in time to _____ very different from the one she lived in.
- 2 a If we are elected, we will build our policies on the simple belief that our purpose is to create bright _____ for our children rather than achieving short-term goals for ourselves.
- b Although our current financial position is worrying, we have many new orders for our products and _____ is bright.
- 3 a As I get older, I seem to remember _____ better than things that happened very recently.
- b At the age of 98, Johnson has _____ that goes back to the start of the last century.
- 4 a If you want to get away from it all, you can take a small boat to deserted _____ on one of the islands.
- b Dear Mum and Dad, We're having a great holiday. The weather's wonderful and we're spending most of our time on _____.

45.2 Underline the correct or more likely answer. If both answers are possible, underline them both. (B)

- 1 We get some strange requests in our shop. We had *the customer/ a customer* in the other day who wanted to buy chocolate-covered ants.
- 2 It sometimes seems that *the individuall an individual* can have little impact on the decisions that governments take.
- 3 The invention of *a carl the car* is normally attributed to the German engineer Gottlieb Daimler.
- 4 *The television/ A television* has changed the way we obtain information more than any other modern invention.
- 5 The campaign against smoking in public places argues that its harmful effects are not confined to *the smoker/ a smoker*.

45.3 Use each of these nouns twice to complete the sentences. Where necessary, add *a/an* at an appropriate place in the sentence. (C)

conversation grammar importance iron pleasure shampoo sound

- 1 My sisters were clearly having ^a serious conversation so I didn't like to disturb them.
- 2 It now gives me great _____ to introduce that marvellous ventriloquist, Marco Lutman.
- 3 The Nile is of critical _____ to the social and economic life of Egypt.
- 4 As we walked through the jungle we heard _____ we weren't expecting – the ring of a mobile phone.
- 5 The failure to teach _____ in schools has caused an overall decline in people's ability to write well.
- 6 Most red meat is relatively high in _____.
- 7 Within a day of washing my hair it starts to feel greasy. I have yet to find _____ to solve this problem.
- 8 _____ travels at different speeds, depending on the temperature of the air.
- 9 I got _____ in my eye this morning in the shower and it's made it really sore.
- 10 It's real _____ to travel by rail in Sweden. The trains are clean and punctual.
- 11 I have _____ of English printed in 1890 on very thin paper.
- 12 Because the central government has relocated there, the town of Paraga has taken on _____ out of all proportion to its size.
- 13 Although he's got _____ he never seems to use it. His shirts are always creased.
- 14 As she walked into the party, _____ ceased and everyone in the crowded room stared at her.

A/an, the and zero article (2)

- A** We use **a/an** to say what a person's job is, was, or will be:
- ☐ She was a **company director** when she retired.
 - ☐ Against her parents' wishes, she wants to be a **journalist**.
- However, when we give a person's job title, or their unique position, we use **the** or **zero article** (i.e. no article), not **a/an**. Compare:
- ☐ She's been appointed **(the) head of the company**. *and*
 - ☐ I'm a **production manager** at Fino. (= there may be more than one production manager)

After the position of, the post of, or the role of we use **zero article** before a job title:

- ☐ Dr Simons has taken on the position of **Head of Department**.

- B** We usually use **zero article** (i.e. no article) before the name of an individual person or place. However, we use **the** –
- ☆ when there are two people with the same name and we want to specify which one we are talking about:
 - ☐ That's not **the Stephen Fraser** I went to school with.
 but compare 'There was a Stephen Fraser in my class.' (= a person named Stephen Fraser)
 - ☆ when we want to emphasise that the person we are referring to is the most famous person with that name. Used this way, **the** is stressed and pronounced /ði:/:
 - ☐ Do they mean **the Ronald Reagan**, or someone else?
 - ☆ with an adjective to describe a person, or another noun which tells us their job:
 - ☐ **the late Buddy Holly**
 - ☐ **the artist William Turner**
 - ☆ when we talk about a family as a whole:
 - ☐ **The Robinsons** are away this weekend.

- C** Notice that **a/an**, or sometimes **zero article**, is used with a name when referring to the particular excellent qualities of the person named:
- ☐ Jane plays tennis well, but she'll never be **(a) Steffi Graf**.
- We also use **a/an** when we refer to an individual example of a product made by a particular manufacturer (e.g. I've just bought a Mercedes) or a work by a particular artist (e.g. Do you think it could be a Van Gogh/a Rembrandt?).
- You can use **a/an** before a person's name if you don't know the person yourself. Compare:
- ☐ Dr Perch is here for you. (= I know Dr Perch) *and*
 - ☐ There's a Dr Kenneth Perch on the phone. (= I haven't heard of him before) Do you want to talk to him?

- D** In stories and jokes in conversation, **this** is commonly used instead of **a/an** to introduce a new person or thing. Using **this** highlights the person or thing as the topic of what is to come next:
- ☐ As I was walking along, **this spider** (= 'a spider') landed on my head, and...
 - ☐ **This man** (= 'a man') goes into a chemist and he says...

- E** We use **the** before a *superlative adjective* (the biggest, the most expensive, etc.) when the superlative adjective is followed by a noun or defining phrase:
- ☐ He is **the finest young player** around at the moment.
- However, we can often leave out **the**, particularly in an informal style, when there is no noun or defining phrase after the superlative adjective. Compare:
- ☐ A: Why did you decide to stay in this hotel?
 - ☐ B: It was **(the) cheapest**. *and* It was **the cheapest** I could find.

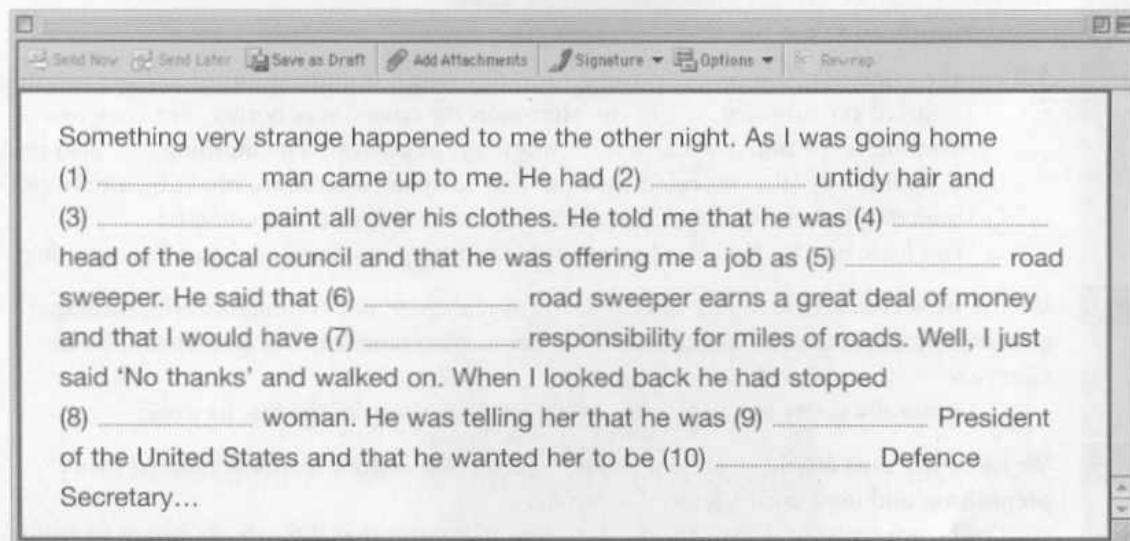
46.1 Put a/an, the or zero article (-) in the spaces. Give all possible answers. (A-C)

- 1 A special award was given to _____ novelist Ian McMurphy.
- 2 I've been offered the position of _____ Director of Personnel.
- 3 I've always wanted to meet _____ Michael Owen.
- 4 'What make is your computer?' 'It's _____ Mac.'
- 5 I'm _____ marketing adviser at Unifleet.
- 6 Let me introduce you to _____ Paula Cox.
- 7 We met our good friend _____ Jean Wools when we were in _____ Plymouth.
- 8 I found myself talking to _____ George Bush! Not _____ George Bush, of course, but someone with the same name.
- 9 Brian's _____ manager of the local football team.
- 10 I didn't even know Joan was interested in art until I heard that she owns _____ Van Gogh.
- 11 When Jennie was young she knew _____ Picasso.
- 12 She was determined to be _____ author.
- 13 He has been appointed _____ Minister for Industry.
- 14 She recently became _____ minister in the new government.
- 15 We're going on holiday with _____ Smiths.
- 16 He's really keen on playing football. He likes to think of himself as _____ Ronaldo.
- 17 _____ Linda Green is outside. Do you want to see her?

46.2 If the underlined the can be left out of these sentences, put brackets around it. (E)

- 1 It's the best ice-cream I've ever tasted.
- 2 Jack's boat wasn't the most elegant in the harbour, but it was certainly the biggest.
- 3 I thought the second competitor was the best, even though he didn't win a prize.
- 4 This is by far the most valuable painting in the collection.
- 5 'Why did you ask Jim to go first?' 'Because he's the oldest.'
- 6 Sapphires occur in a variety of colours, but blue ones are the most valuable.
- 7 The Pacific is the biggest ocean in the world.
- 8 It's supposed to be the oldest post office in the country.

46.3 Complete the text with a/an, the, zero article or this. Give alternatives where possible. (Units 45 & 46)



Something very strange happened to me the other night. As I was going home
 (1) _____ man came up to me. He had (2) _____ untidy hair and
 (3) _____ paint all over his clothes. He told me that he was (4) _____
 head of the local council and that he was offering me a job as (5) _____ road
 sweeper. He said that (6) _____ road sweeper earns a great deal of money
 and that I would have (7) _____ responsibility for miles of roads. Well, I just
 said 'No thanks' and walked on. When I looked back he had stopped
 (8) _____ woman. He was telling her that he was (9) _____ President
 of the United States and that he wanted her to be (10) _____ Defence
 Secretary...

A/an, the and zero article (3)

A With plural and uncountable nouns, **zero article** (i.e. no article) is used to talk generally, without definite people or things in mind. **The** is used when we assume the listener or reader will understand who or what we are referring to, or when other words in the noun phrase make the reference specific. Compare:

- ☐ The government has promised not to tax **books**. (= books generally) *and*
- ☐ **The books** have arrived. (= the books you ordered)
- ☐ **Music** played an important part in his life. (= music generally) *and*
- ☐ I thought **the music** used in the film was the best part. (= this particular music)

B We often use **zero article** with the names of holidays, special times of the year, months, and days of the week including Easter, Ramadan, New Year's Day. But compare:

- ☐ I'll see you on **Saturday**. (= next Saturday) ☐ We met on **Saturday**. (= last Saturday)
- ☐ They arrived on **a Saturday** as far as I can remember. (we are only interested in the day of the week, not which particular Saturday)
- ☐ They arrived on **the Saturday** after my birthday. (a particular Saturday, specifying which one)

With winter, summer, spring, autumn, and New Year (meaning the holiday period), we can use either **zero article** or **the**:

- ☐ In **(the) summer** I try to spend as much time as I can in the garden.

We use **the** when it is understood or we go on to specify which summer, spring, etc. we mean:

- ☐ I'd like to go skiing in **the autumn**. (= this year) ☐ I first went skiing in **the spring** of 1992.

We say 'in the New Year' to mean near the beginning of next year:

- ☐ I'll see you again in **the New Year**.

When we want to describe the features of a particular holiday, season, or other period of time and say that it was somehow special when compared with others, we can use **It/That was... + a/an + noun + modifying phrase**. Compare:

- ☐ That was **a winter** I'll never forget. (= compared to other winters it was unforgettable) *and*
- ☐ That was **the winter** we went to Norway. (= a statement about a particular winter)

C We use **zero article** with times of the day and night such as **midnight, midday, and noon**:

- ☐ If possible, I'd like it finished by **midday**. ☐ **Midnight** couldn't come quickly enough.

But notice that we can say either **the dawn** or **dawn**:

- ☐ He got back into bed and waited for **(the) dawn**.

We use **the + morning/afternoon/evening** for a day which is understood or already specified:

- ☐ I enjoyed **the morning**, but in **the afternoon** the course was boring. But compare:
- ☐ **Morning** is the time I work best. (= mornings in general; **The morning...** is also possible)
- ☐ I'll be there by **(the) morning/evening**. (*but ...by the afternoon, not ...by afternoon*)
- ☐ I waited **all morning**. (*more usual than all the morning/afternoon, etc.*)
- ☐ 'You look upset.' 'Yes, I've had a terrible **morning**.' (= compared to other mornings)

D We use **by + zero article** to talk about means of transport and communication, including go/travel **by car/taxi/bus/plane/train/air/sea**; contact/communicate **by post/email/phone**.

Compare:

- ☐ I generally go **by bus** to work. *and* ☐ I generally take **the bus** to work.

E We often use **zero article** in patterns where repeated or related words are joined by a preposition and used with a general meaning:

- ☐ The government makes grants according to criteria that differ from **region to region**.

Other examples include **person to person, back to back, end to end, face to face, side by side, start to finish, day by day, put pen to paper**.