

Grammar Reference

Articles

Indefinite article: a and an

A or **an** means one person or thing. We use **a** or **an**:

1) before singular nouns: *I've been to **a** concert. We had **a** great day and we saw **an** elephant.*

2) before the name of a job:

*My sister wants to be **an** engineer.*

A or an?

Use **a** before consonant sounds: **a** chair, **a** horse, **a** laptop

This includes letters **u** or **eu** when they are pronounced **y** (/j/): **a** university, **a** euro

Use **an** before vowel sounds. These words usually start with **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**: **an** architect, **an** idea, **an** umbrella

Also use **an** with words that start with the letter **h** when the **h** is not pronounced: **an** hour, **an** honour

Definite article: the

We use **the**:

1) before singular nouns that we have already mentioned with **a/an**:

*We saw **an** elephant. **The** elephant was standing under some trees.*

2) before singular, plural or uncountable nouns when we say exactly which person or thing we mean:

***The** people who live next door are really nice.*

*Where's **the** brown sugar?*

Note that we don't use **the** before plural and uncountable nouns when we are talking about things in general:

***Children** need plenty of exercise and fresh air. (children in general)*

***Sugar** isn't good for you. (sugar in general)*

3) We also use **the** before singular, plural or uncountable nouns when it is clear which person or thing we mean:

*I'm going to **the** supermarket. (the one we always go to)*

***The** children are upstairs. (our children)*

*Could you shut **the** door? (the door of this room)*

4) We use **the** before nouns when there is only one:

***The** sun is shining and there aren't any clouds in **the** sky.*

5) We use **the** with superlatives:

*You're **the** best dad ever!*

6) We use **the** in many expressions with 'of'

*In **the** middle of the night*

***The** Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*

*At **the** end of my holiday*

The or zero article?

Here are some rules:

Use **the** with

Countries with plural names or with Republic or Kingdom in the name: *The United Arab Emirates, The Netherlands, The United Kingdom*

Geographical areas in noun phrases: *I live in the north-west of Egypt, in the east*

The names of rivers, seas, oceans and mountain ranges: *The Mississippi, The Black Sea, The Atlantic, The Urals*

Parts of the day: *in the morning/afternoon/evening*

Most prepositional phrases of position and place: *at the top, on the left, at the office/bank/cinema*

Use **zero article** (-) with

The names of most countries, cities and continents: *Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Warsaw, Beijing, Europe, Asia*

Geographical areas in adjective phrases: *I live in (-) north-west Egypt, (-) eastern France*

The names of single mountains and lakes: *Mount Kilimanjaro, Lake Titicaca*

Exact days, months and times: *on (-) Friday, in (-) March, at (-) 7 o'clock*

Some prepositional phrases of place: *at (-) home, at (-) work, in (-) bed, at (-) sea*

Take note: school/university, etc.

There is a special rule for these places: school, university, college, hospital, prison, church. Compare these examples:

*The children go **to school** by bus. I go **to the school** to help twice a week.*

*Ben's studying maths **at university**. He works in the canteen **at the university**.*

*She was **in hospital** for three weeks. Is there a shop **in the hospital**?*

If someone is at the place because they are a student / are sick / a prisoner, etc, we don't use **the**. If they are there for another reason, or we are talking about the building, we use **the**.

Articles and adjectives

Adjectives go between articles and nouns: What **a great place** this is! I went on **an amazing trip**. We went to **the famous Bondi beach**.

Pronouncing articles

We usually pronounce **a/an** with a weak vowel sound /ə/ ('uh'). It sounds like the vowel sound in **fun**, and not the vowel sound in **cat**.

Before consonants and the letters **u** or **eu** when they are pronounced **y** (/j/), we pronounce **the** with this weak sound /ə/, too.

the doctor, the party, the uniform

But when **the** is before a vowel sound, we pronounce **the** with the long **ee** sound in **see**.

the afternoon, the ice, the open door, the upstairs rooms

Secrets of schwa

Schwa is a short vowel sound.

It is the most common sound in the English language.

It is never stressed.

The sound schwa is very important to natural English.

It appears in many words of more than one syllable.

It is the sound of many grammar words like articles and prepositions when they are not stressed.

