*A/an* and *the*

## *A/an* and *the:* meaning

*A/an* and *the* are articles. They are a type of determiner and they go before a noun.

*A/an* before a noun shows that what is referred to is not already known to the speaker, listener, writer and/or reader (it is the indefinite article):

*Do you have****a****car?*

**A:**

*Do you live in* ***a*** *house*?

**B:**

*No, actually, I live in* ***an*** *apartment*.

*The* before a noun shows that what is referred to is already known to the speaker, listener, writer and/or reader (it is the definite article):

*Where did we park****the****car?* (The speaker and the listener know what car is being referred to.)

*We had to paint****the****apartment before we sold it.* (The speaker and the listener know what apartment is being referred to.)

*The* makes a noun specific.

**Compare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Have you been to****an****ice rink?* | The speaker is not asking about any one specific ice rink but is asking whether they have been to any ice rink (*an* doesn’t refer to a specific ice rink) |
| *Have you been to****the****ice rink?* | The speaker and listener know the ice rink which is being referred to (e.g. the one in their town/the local one). *The* makes the noun *ice rink* specific. |
| Not specific | Specific (‘the one you and I know’) |
| *Would you like****an****apple?* | *Would you like to try****the****apple pie?* |
| *Do you have****a****cat?* | *Have you seen****the****cat?* |

## When do we use *a* and when do we use *an*?

In speaking, we use *a* */ə/* before a consonant sound:

*a car a house a big truck a wheel a grey day*

**Warning:**

Some words that begin with a vowel letter in writing have a consonant sound:

*/ə ju:ˈnaɪtɪd …/ /ə ju:niˈvɜ:sɪti/ /ə wʌn …/*

*a united group a university a one-year-old child*

We use *an* */ən/* before a vowel sound:

*an apple an old shoe an orchestra an umbrella*

**Warning:**

Some words that begin with a consonant letter in writing have a vowel sound:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| */ən aʊə(r)*/ *an hour* | */ən empi:θri*: …/ *an MP3 player* |

## How do we pronounce *the*?

We pronounce *the* in two ways depending on whether the sound which comes after *the* is a vowel or a consonant:

#### **/ði:/ before vowel sounds**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| */ði: eksɪt*/ *the exit* | */ði: æpəl*/ *the apple* |

#### **/ðə/ before consonant sounds**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| */ðə ti:m*/ *the team* | */ðə ju:niən*/ *the union* |

## When do we use articles?

### ***A/an* and *the* with types of nouns**

#### **Countable nouns**

We only use *a/an* with singular countable nouns:

*I have****a****sister and****a****brother.*

*That was****an****excellent meal.*

We can use *the* with singular and plural countable nouns:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***The****lion roared.* | ***The****tree fell.* |
| ***The****lions roared.* | ***The****trees fell.* |

#### **Uncountable nouns**

We don’t use *a/an* before uncountable nouns:

*Could I have rice instead of potatoes with my fish?*

Not: ~~Could I have a rice~~

*I hope we have nice weather.*

Not: ~~I hope we have a nice weather~~.

We can use *the* before uncountable nouns when they refer to a specific example:

***The rice****we bought in the Thai shop is much better than the supermarket rice.*

***The weather****was awful last summer.*

To talk about an individual quantity or more than one quantity of an uncountable noun, we use expressions such as *a bit of, a piece of* or *a* [specific measure] *of*:

*That’s****an****amazing****bit of****news.*

Not: ~~That’s an amazing news~~.

*We just made****a****big****bowl of****pasta.*

Not: ~~We just made a pasta~~.

*Could I have****a litre of****milk, please?*

Not: ~~Could I have a milk, please?~~

### **General nouns**

We only use *the* with general plural nouns when we are referring to a specific set within a general class of people or things.

**Compare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Books****are so important in my life.* | I mean all books in general. |
| ***The books****were all over the floor.* | I mean specific books (that you and I know). |

We can make general nouns specific by using an article and adding more information after the noun.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Life****is wonderful.* (life in general) | ***The life****of a soldier is full of danger.* (specifically the life of soldiers, not life in general)  *She had****a life****of hard work.* (one specific life) |
| ***History****sometimes repeats itself.* (history in general) | *He wrote a book on****the history****of boxing.* (specifically the history of boxing)  *The country has****a history****of going to war.* (one specific history of one country) |

### **Inventions, musical instruments and cultural institutions**

When we talk in general about inventions, musical instruments or cultural institutions (such as the cinema, the theatre, the circus, the opera, the ballet), we often use *the*:

***The computer****must be the greatest invention ever.* (The computer as an invention in general, not a specific computer)

***The violin****sounds different to the viola.*

*I love a night at****the opera.***

### **No article before determiners (*any, some, my, this*)**

We don’t use an article with other words that specify a noun (determiner), e.g. *any, some, my, her, this, that*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *I love my job.*  Not: ~~I love the my job~~. | *Does she want this book?*  Not: ~~Does she want the this book?~~ |

### ***The* with things that are universally known**

We use *the* with things known to everyone (the sun, the stars, the moon, the earth, the planet) because they are a part of our physical environment or part of the natural world:

***The earth****moves around****the sun****.*

*We lay on****the grass****and watched****the stars****.*

### ***The* with everyday things**

We use *the* with things that we know as part of our daily lives. *The* does not refer to particular things in this context.

*I don’t buy****the newspaper****these days. It’s free on****the Internet****.* (newspapers in general)

*They always take****the train****.* (trains in general)

### **Jobs and professions**

When we talk about a person’s job, we use *a*:

*She’s****a****gardener.*

*He’s****an****ambulance driver.*

### **Places**

We use *the* with mountain ranges and some mountains (*the Alps, the Eiger*), groups of islands (*the West Indies*), rivers (*the Danube*), deserts (*the Gobi Desert*), seas (*the Black Sea*), geographical regions or habitats (*the Amazon rainforest*), motorways (*the M42*), the names of some countries (*the People’s Republic of China*).

We don’t usually use articles with individual mountains or lakes when the name includes *Mount* or *Lake*: *Mount Fuji*, *Lake Victoria*. We don’t use articles with continents (*Asia*), countries (*Romania*), towns (*Edinburgh*), and streets (*Lombard Street*).

### ***The* with groups within society**

When we talk about particular groups or people within society, we use *the* + adjective:

*I think****the rich****should pay more tax and that****the poor****shouldn’t pay any.*

***The young****need to be encouraged and supported in society.*

### ***The* with dates**

When we say a specific date, we use *the*, but when we write it, we don’t use *the*:

*Speaking: ‘I’ll see you on****the****twenty fourth of May.’*

Writing: *I’ll see you on 24th May*.

When we talk about months, we don’t use *the*:

*My birthday is in****September****.*

***May****is my favourite month of all.*

When we talk about seasons in general, we can use either *in* or *in the. In* without *the* is often used in more formal or literary contexts:

*These birds arrive in Britain****in summer****, and leave as****the winter****begins.*

***In the summer****, we usually go to the mountains.*

*We rarely get snow****in the winter****.*

When we talk about a specific season, we use *the*:

***The winter****of 1947 was one of the coldest in Britain.*

*We’ll definitely visit you****in the summer****.* (meaning next summer)

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### ***The* with Internet, radio and newspaper but mostly not with TV**

*I looked it up on****the Internet.***

Not: ~~on internet~~

*She was on****the radio****once.*

Not: ~~on radio~~

*Did you see that story about parrots in****the******newspaper****?*

Not: ~~in newspaper~~

*There’s usually nothing on TV.* (TV means television)

*There’s usually nothing on****the television****.* (less common)

### ***The* with *go to*, *be at*, *be in hospital*, *school*, *prison***

When we talk about the activity that happens in a building rather than about the building itself, we don’t use *the*.

**Compare**

| **without** ***the*** | **with** ***the*** |
| --- | --- |
| *She didn’t want to be****in hospital****but she was too ill to go home.* (*in hospital* means being there as a patient) | *She didn’t want to be****in the hospital****…* (*in the hospital* means being in the building) |
| *When I was****at school****, we didn’t have computers.* (*at school* means being there as a student) | *When I was****at the school****…* (*at the school* means being in the building) |

We don’t use *the* with *bed* when we go there to sleep:

*I always****go to bed****at eleven o’clock.*

Not: ~~I always go to the bed~~ …

We don’t use *the* before *work* when we talk about the place where we do our job:

*They****go to work****at 8 am every morning.*

Not: ~~They go to the work~~ …

### **Possessive expressions**

We don’t use *the* to refer to an individual’s behaviour or to parts of an individual’s body:

*He spends most of****his****free time playing computer games.*

Not: ~~He spends most of the free time~~ …

*I must wash****my****hands.*

Not: ~~I must wash the hands~~.

### ***This*, *that* and articles**

We can use *this* instead of *a/an* or *the*, and *these* instead of *zero article* or *some* when we tell stories and jokes to create a sense of the present:

[beginning of a joke]

*There was****this****chicken who wanted to cross the road …* (compare *There was a chicken who wanted to cross the road …*)

***These****tourists came into the restaurant once and they ordered fifteen Irish coffees.* (compare *Some tourists came into the restaurant once and they ordered …*)

**Spoken English:**

In informal speaking, we can use *that* as an alternative to *the* in stories when we refer to something familiar or known to the listener. *That* highlights the fact that the thing being referred to is known to the speaker and listener:

**A:**

*Where did you buy your skirt? I really like it*.

**B:**

*I got it at* ***that*** *new shop next to Green’s Hotel*. (compare *I got it at* ***the*** *new shop next to Green’s Hotel*.)

## *A/an* and *the*: typical errors

* We don’t use *the* with plural nouns when we are referring to things in general:

*We have to protect wild animals.* (referring to wild animals in general)

Not: ~~the wild animals~~.

* We don’t use *the* when we refer in general to something abstract or uncountable:

*I love Japanese food.* (all Japanese food/Japanese food in general)

Not: ~~I love the Japanese food~~.

* We don’t use *the* when the noun is not known to the listener or reader:

*Last Sunday, we saw****a****film called ‘Nightmare’.* (The speaker doesn’t think that the listener knows of this film.)

Not: … ~~we saw the film called ‘Nightmare’~~.

* We don’t use *the* instead of a possessive pronoun:

*The police asked us to put****our****hands up.*

Not: ~~The police asked us to put the hands up~~.

* We don’t use an article with *go to bed*:

*I****go to bed****at eleven most nights.*

Not: ~~I go to the bed at eleven most nights~~.