

# English Articles

In English, knowing when to use '**a**' or '**the**' can be difficult. Fortunately, there are rules to help you, but you need to know what type of noun you are using.

## Grammar rule 1

When you have a single, countable English noun, you must always have an article before it. We cannot say "please pass me pen", we must say "please pass me **the** pen" or "please pass me **a** pen" or "please pass me **your** pen".  
Nouns in English can also be uncountable. Uncountable nouns can be concepts, such as 'life', 'happiness' and so on, or materials and substances, such as 'coffee', or 'wood'.

## Grammar rule 2

Uncountable nouns don't use '**a**' or '**an**'. This is because you can't count them. For example, advice is an uncountable noun. You can't say "he gave me an advice", but you can say "he gave me **some** advice", or "he gave me **a piece of** advice".  
Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable. For example, we say "coffee" meaning the product, but we say "**a** coffee" when asking for one cup of coffee.

## Grammar rule 3

You can use '**the**' to make general things specific. You can use '**the**' with any type of noun – plural or singular, countable or uncountable.

"Please pass me **a** pen" – any pen.

"Please pass me **the** pen" – the one that we can both see.

"Children grow up quickly" – children in general.

"**The** children I know grow up quickly" – not all children, just the ones I know.

"Poetry can be beautiful"- poetry in general.

"**The** poetry of Hopkins is beautiful" – I'm only talking about the poetry Hopkins wrote.

## More uses of articles in English

**Rivers, mountain ranges, seas, oceans and geographic areas** all use '**the**'.

For example, "**The** Thames", "**The** Alps", "**The** Atlantic Ocean", "**The** Middle East".

**Unique things** have '**the**'.

For example, "**the** sun", "**the** moon".

**Some institutional buildings** don't have an article if you visit them for the reason these buildings exist. But if you go to the building for another reason, you must use '**the**'.

"Her husband is in prison." (He's a prisoner.)

"She goes to **the** prison to see him once a month."

"My son is in school." (He's a student.)

"I'm going to **the** school to see the head master."

"She's in hospital at the moment." (She's ill.)

"Her husband goes to **the** hospital to see her every afternoon."

**Musical instruments** use '**the**'.

"She plays **the** piano."

**Sports** don't have an article.

"He plays football."

**Illnesses** don't have an article.

"He's got appendicitis."

But we say "**a** cold" and "**a** headache".

**Jobs** use 'a'.

"I'm **a** teacher."

### Countries

We don't use 'a' if the country is singular. "He lives in England." But if the country's name has a "plural" meaning, we use 'the'. "**The** People's Republic of China", "**The** Netherlands", "**The** United States of America".

**Continents, towns and streets** don't have an article.

"Africa", "New York", "Church Street".

**Theatres, cinemas and hotels** have 'the'.

"**The** Odeon", "**The** Almeida", "**The** Hilton".

**Abbreviations** use 'the'.

"**the** UN", "**the** USA", "**the** IMF".

We use 'the' before **classes of people**.

"**the** rich", "**the** poor", "**the** British".

### Functions and examples

**1. We use a / an when we are talking about something for the first time.**

He is wearing **a** suit and **a** tie.

They have **a** cat.

**2. We use the when we are talking about a specific person or thing, or if there is only one, or if it is clear which one we are talking about.**

She took **a** glass of water and started to drink. (one of many glasses of water)

She took **the** glass of water nearest to her. (a specific glass)

She took **the** glass of water and started to drink. (there is only one glass of water)

Can you turn on **the** TV? (it's clear we are talking about the TV in this room)

I have to see **the** doctor tomorrow. (it's clear I am talking about my usual doctor)

I need to see **a** doctor. (not any specific doctor)

How many people have walked on **the** moon? (there is only one moon)

**The** best film I've ever seen is *Top Gun*. (there can only be one best film)

**3. We use no article when we are talking about people or things in general.**

**Carrots** are good for you. (carrots in general)

**The carrots** growing in my garden are almost ready to eat. (specific carrots)

**English people** drink a lot of tea. (English people in general)

**The English people** in this hotel are very nice. (specific English people)

**4. We use a / an to say what kind of person or thing someone or something is (often with an adjective, or to say it belongs to a particular group.**

You have **a** nice house.

That's **a** very expensive car!

A cat is **an** animal a bus is **a** vehicle.

**5. With school, university, prison, hospital, church, bed, work and home we use the when we are talking about a particular one, and no article when we are talking about the idea of school, university...**

**The church** on our street was built in the 17th Century. (a particular church)

I go to **church** every Sunday (the idea of church, not a particular building)

My friend works at **the prison** outside the city centre.

My husband is in **prison**.

**The work** isn't finished yet.

I was feeling sick yesterday so I didn't go to **work**.

**The new bed** is bigger than the old one.

I put my children to **bed** at 8pm.

**6. We use *the* with singular countable nouns to talk about a type of thing.**

**The computer** was invented in the 20th Century. (not a particular computer)

**The computer** in my office is broken. (a particular one)

**The crocodile** is very dangerous. (this type of animal)

**The crocodile** in the river is very big. (a particular one)

She plays **the piano**. (not a particular piano but this type of instrument)

**The piano** she is playing is very old. (a particular one)

**7. We use *the* + adjective to talk about a group of people (including nationalities).**

I always give money to **the homeless**.

**The unemployed** receive money from the government.

**The French** produce good wine.

**8. We use *a / an* to talk about someone's job.**

My wife is **an** optician.

She works as **a** mechanic.

**9. We use no article with continents, countries, regions, cities, streets, mountains, lakes and parks.**

Asia, Italy, California, Bristol, Main St., Mount Everest, Lake Superior, Central Park

We use ***the*** if the country contains *Kingdom, Republic, State, Union*

**10. We use *the* with plural names of people and places.**

**The Smiths, The Netherlands, The United States, The Bahamas, The Alps** (also **The Caribbean**)

**11. We use *the* with oceans, seas, rivers and canals.**

**The Atlantic Ocean, The Red Sea, The Nile, The Panama Canal**

**12. We use *the* with north, south, east and west to talk about the location of a place within another place, but no article to compare the location of two places.**

Greece is in **the south** of Europe.

Spain is **south** of France.

**We use no article with northern, southern, eastern and western:**

Greece is in southern Europe.

**13. We normally use *the* with buildings, except if the first word is the name of a place.**

**The White House, The Sheraton Hotel.**

**Omission of Articles**

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities: *Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian* (unless you are referring to the population of the nation: "**The** Spanish are known for their warm hospitality.")
- Names of sports: *volleyball, hockey, baseball*
- Names of academic subjects: *mathematics, biology, history, computer science*