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The Use of Articles in English

Articles are words that define a noun as specific or unspecific. English has two types of articles: indefinite (a, an) and definite (the).

Indefinite articles (a/an)

If the noun is singular and countable, and this is the first time it has been mentioned, then you will usually need an indefinite article:

- I went to **a bank** (we do not know which bank).
- Paris is **an interesting** city (there are many interesting cities and Paris is one).
- There is **a customer** outside (we do not know anything about the customer).
- Measurements and rates also take the indefinite article (e.g. four times **a week**).

Rule: a + singular noun beginning with a consonant: *a company*
an + singular noun beginning with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u): *an outstanding company*

The definite article (the)

If you believe your reader or listener know exactly what you are referring to, then you will usually need the definite article in front of a noun:

- I bought **a company** last week. **The company** produces engine parts (you have just mentioned the company, so you both know which one).
- Can I ask **a question**? (There are many questions; can I ask one?)
- Can you repeat **the question**, please? (The question that you asked).

The definite article is usually used for common knowledge in English

- Currencies – **The pound** was seen staging a recovery against **the dollar**.
- Decades – James Stewart was a famous actor in **the 1950s**.
- Superlatives and ordinals – **The third** book in the series is **the best**.
- Oceans, seas and many rivers – **The Swan-Avon River** flows to **the Indian Ocean**.
- Plural or united countries (those which have the word *United* in their name) – **The Philippines** is smaller than **the United States of America**.
- Adjectives used as nouns – **The rich** should pay higher taxes than **the poor**.
- Many organisations – **The United Nations** is an intergovernmental organisation.
- A scientific categorisation – **The giraffe** is the tallest of all animals.
- A symbol – **The Merlion** is a symbol of Singapore.
- Unique people, places or things – **The president** said he would call a conference on changes affecting the earth's climate. (Each country has only one president, so in that sense the person is unique.)
- Unique adjectives – **The same** people always take **the only** parking spaces available.



Other word patterns which take *the*

- Specific nouns modified by a relative clause – ***The products*** (which are) in the factory
- Specific nouns followed by 'of'. This is a very common pattern – ***The use of*** this procedure
- Plural nouns preceded by 'of' – e.g. ***None of the products*** have been tested.

No article

We do not need an article if a noun is plural or uncountable and it is not definite:

- ***Managers*** mostly rely of intuition.
- ***Women*** generally live longer than ***men***.
- ***Articles*** are difficult to use.
- This is ***great news***.

Now compare these sentences:

- ***Students*** should study hard to succeed (all students, so they are general).
- ***The students*** in *John's class* should study hard to succeed (*John's students, so they are specified*).

Definitions

Definitions can take *a/an*, *the*, or no article:

- ***A library*** is a place where you can find books (this means that any library is a place where you can find books).
- ***The library*** is a place where you can find books (this views the library as a particular type of place, representative of a category of buildings such as university buildings).
- ***Libraries*** are places where you can find books (this means that all libraries are places where you can find books).

If you like to learn more about articles, visit the Curtin Learning Centre Online Programs at <http://studyskills.curtin.edu.au/good-grammar/section-3-articles/>

References

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