

"A/an" and "The" are the three types of English articles. There are rules to help you decide which one to use, but first, 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 English articles

Here are some more rules for when we use English articles "a/an" and "the" – or when we omit the article:

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".

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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".

Some Rules using Articles

Singular count nouns:

indefinite: use 'a'

definite: use "the"

My daughter wants to buy a dog this weekend.

(Indefinite-Could be any dog)

The dog in the backyard is very cute. (Definite-The one in the backyard)

He requested a puppy for his birthday.

He wanted the puppy he played with at the pet shop.

She ordered a hamburger without onions.

Did you drink the coke I just ordered?

Plural count nouns:

Use "the" or Nothing, never 'a'.

Come and look at the children. (definite)

Children are always curious. (indefinite)

She loves flowers. (indefinite)

The flowers in her garden are beautiful. (definite)

Do you like reading grammar rules?

Do you like reading the grammar rules on this page?

Non-count nouns:

Use "the" or nothing.

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He has experience. (if indefinite or mentioned for the first time)

He has the experience necessary for the job. (if definite or mentioned before)

The medicine the doctor prescribed had unpleasant side effects.

Writing in a second language is especially challenging.

Have you studied the history of South Africa?

History reminds us that events repeat themselves.

Definite Article THE Rules

Adjectives as Nouns

When referring to a group of people by use of an adjective rather than a noun, use "the".

the elderly the disabled the unemployed

the rich the sick the needy

the homeless the young the restless

Names of Countries

Some countries are preceded by "the", usually if the name is plural, contains an adjective, or includes "of".

The United States The Soviet Union
The Republic of Congo
America Russia Spain
Japan China Mexico

Cities and Streets use nothing

Chicago Fifth Avenue San Francisco
Highway 5 London Kennedy blvd.

Rivers, Oceans, Seas, Groups of Mountains &
Islands use "the"

the Amazon the Atlantic the Mediterranean
the Cascades the Hawaiian Islands the
Bahamas

Numbers

Cardinal numbers(1,2,3) use nothing
World War 2 Page 7 Chapter 1
Mission 1 Paragraph 5 Channel 6

Ordinal numbers (1st,2nd,3rd) use "the"
The Second World War the seventh page
the first chapter
the first mission the fifth paragraph the sixth
channel

Titles of People

When a title is given with a name, use nothing

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When a title is given with a name, use nothing

President Mitchael Queen Mary Professor Scott

When a title is used without a name, use "the"

The president the queen the professor

Schools

When a school has "of" in its title, use "the"

The University of Arizona The University of
London Chapter 2

When a school does not have "of" in its title, use
nothing

Lincoln High School Arizona State University
Liverpool John Moores University

Location versus Activity

When referring to an activity, use nothing

I am going to school now.(activity-study)

He is always on time for class. (activity-learn)

When referring to the location, use "the"

The meeting is at the school. (location-campus)

They are remodeling the movie theater. (location-
building)

The new student had trouble finding the class.
(location-classroom)

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Unique Objects - Use THE

the earth the human race the world

the moon the sun the universe

Part of a larger group, Use THE

-One of the students

-None of the students

-Both of the students

-All of the students

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