Help With: The English Articles  

Few things are as frustrating to a learner of English as the indefinite and definite articles *a* and *the*, mostly because many languages don’t have them, and most are not as particular in their usage as English is. Don’t feel overwhelmed—native speakers make mistakes with them too. Over time it’s possible to develop a sense for which one to use.

The general idea is as follows:

**No article:** You are talking about something as a group without being specific.

**A:** You are talking about any single object out of a possible group.

**The:** You are talking specifically about one object, and the audience knows which object you mean. Or, you are using one object to symbolize all of them.

**Examples:**

**Ducks like to swim.**
There is no article here because we are talking about ducks generally. We need an *s* because we are talking about them in plural.

**There is a duck in my bathtub.**
Use *a* because we are talking about one duck out of millions of possible ducks. We don’t say “I saw a moon” because there is only one visible; it’s not in a group. *A* comes from the word *one* in Old English.

**The duck quacked all night.**
We mean one duck, and one the audience knows about (you can say “the sun is hot” without saying “there is a sun” first because it’s obvious). *The* means one specific thing. *The* is related to *that* in the English language of the middle ages—if we say “look at that mouse!” we can see which mouse is meant.

Now let’s look at articles in more detail.

1. **Use no article**
   - With proper names
     - *I met with Dr. Johnson.*
   - When you are referring to things in a group generally
     - *Elephants are my favorite animals.*
   - With the names of subjects, languages, and countries
     - *We are learning Spanish from a teacher from Mexico.*

2. **Use a**
   - When you are talking about a single example of something
     - *I fed a cat today.* (It could be any cat.)
     - *Would you please hand me a pen?* (I don’t care which pen you hand me; any pen will do.)
     - *Sunny is a teacher.* (A shows membership in a group. Sunny is one of many teachers.)
There is an elephant in my bed. (Use an before a vowel sound.)

3. Use the

- When you are talking about a specific something in the group that the hearer knows.
  - The duck I fed was fat and brown. (Now this duck is specific. It is not any duck but the duck you fed.)
  - Sunny is the best teacher in the school. (Sunny is not just any teacher. She is the best teacher. Only one of something can be the best.)
- After you have identified something the hearer doesn’t know about.
  - The sun was hot today. (This is fine, because it’s obvious; we can only see one sun.)
  - We ate at a Chinese restaurant last night. The restaurant was crowded. (A first sentence is necessary to establish the restaurant in the hearer’s mind.)
- Use the with a single group (this is confusing, but try to think of a group as one something).
  - We saw the new alligators at the zoo. (We didn’t see just any alligators. We saw the new ones.)
  - The box of computer parts is heavy. (The box is one thing, even if it contains many things.)
- Use the when you are talking about the concept of something.
  - The dog is a very loyal animal. The computer has changed the world. (You symbolically mean every dog and every computer.)

Problems & Exceptions

I’m going home. I’m going to school. He was sent to prison.

Old English used fewer articles and prepositions, and so some very traditional statements which suggest a kind of action or process still don’t have an article. Home doesn’t even need a to. Common places which don’t need an a or the include I’m going to—church, school, work, dorm, bed, prison, university.

- Don’t use the with the names of countries, cities, continents, lakes, or mountains.
- Do use the with the names of rivers, oceans, seas, geographic areas, deserts.
- A country which is a group of islands or states does take a the: The USA, The Philippines.
- Universities often take the: The University of Nevada—but not with the acronym: “I go to UNLV”—or with universities based on names: Stanford University.

Examples: Japan, the Mississippi River, Asia, the Pacific Ocean, Lake Superior, Mount Charleston, the Mojave Desert, the Middle East, the Amazon.

A Few More Rules

- A count noun can be singular or plural. It is something that can be counted.
  - I like to eat tacos. I can eat only one taco. My girlfriend can eat three tacos.
- An uncountable noun does not have a plural form. Uncountable nouns are usually substances or an abstract idea. They cannot be counted.
  - I like to eat rice. I can eat a lot of rice. (But I can’t eat three rice.)
- A and an can be used with countable nouns, but not with uncountable ones.
  - I am sitting on a chair. (Not “I am sitting on a furniture.”)
- The may be used with either.
  - The chairs are brown. The snow is falling. The beer is warm.