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Test Your Grammar Skills

When to Use Articles – a / an & the

There are three articles in the English language – **a / an** and **the**. They are often used in sentences before nouns that are **common** and **countable**.

Examples

sugar is common but uncountable	I like sugar in my tea. <i>not</i> I like a sugar in my tea.
France is a proper noun	I went to France on holiday this year. <i>not</i> I went to the France on holiday this year.
coat is common and countable	I bought a coat yesterday.

But do I use **a / an** or **the**?

a / an (indefinite articles)

- We use **a / an** when it is the first time that we refer to something:

“This morning I bought **a** book.”

- We use **an** when it is the first time that we refer to something which starts with a vowel sound:

“This morning I bought **an** apple.”

the (definite article)

- We use **the** when we have already introduced the thing (noun):

“This morning I bought **a** book.” “Have you started **the** book yet?” “No, not yet.”

We know which book you are talking about – it has become “the book”, a specific book, rather than “any” book.

- We use **the** when the thing is something specific:

“What is **the** name of **the** girl who won X Factor last year?”

There was only one girl who won it and she had a specific name.

- We use **the** when both of you know which thing you mean:

“How do I get to **the** airport?”

You both know which airport you are talking about – you wouldn't be on your way to **an** – to *any* – airport...!

- Compare the following two sentences:

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“I’m going to **the** cinema later.”

You both know which cinema – probably the one nearest to you.

“I’m going to **a** cinema later.”

You don’t know which one and it is not important which one. It could be *any* cinema.

- We use **the** before a superlative adjective:

“This has been **the** best day of my life.”

Some Example Errors:

“I live in **the** house in Bristol.”

There is more than one house in Bristol! Use “...**a** house...”

“What’s **a** phone number for the swimming pool?”

The swimming pool has only got one phone number – a specific number. Use “...**the** phone number...”

- We use **a** when we talk about frequency or quantity:

“Once **a** week.”

“Three times **a** day.”

“92 pence **a** litre.”

- We use **a / an** to show that somebody or something is part of a group:

“Louise is **a** teacher.”

“Brian is **a** crossword addict.”

“My car is **an** old blue Vauxhall Corsa.”

- If the thing has one or more modifier before it – e.g. an adjective or an intensifier – the article goes before the first modifier:

“It was **a** great party.”

“My grandma had **a** really lovely day.”

- Uncountable nouns don’t need an article in front of them:

“Would you like wine with your meal, madam?” *not*

“Would you like **the** wine with your meal, madam?”

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- Proper nouns don't usually need an article in front of them:

"I work at Starbucks." *not*

"I work at **the** Starbucks." *but*

"I work at **the** Starbucks in **the** market place." (A specific Starbucks coffee shop.)

- There are some exceptions to this rule:

"I went to the United States on business last month."

When the proper noun is made up of an adjective + noun (e.g. "United" = adjective + "Kingdom" = noun) we need to use the definite article:

"I live in the United Kingdom."

- If you are talking about things in general terms, you don't need an article:

"I love cats. They are really friendly." *not*

"I love **the** cats. They are really friendly." *but*

"I love **the** cats from next door. They are really friendly." (Specific cats.)

"She eats sweets all the time." *not*

"She eats **the** sweets all the time." *but*

"She eats **the** sweets that belong to her brother all the time." (Specific sweets.)