

Articles

an analytic approach



Introduction

English has an **indefinite article** and a **definite article**. The **indefinite article**, **a**, is only used with singular **nouns**, not with plural or uncountable **nouns**. The **definite article**, **the**, can be used with singular, plural and uncountable **nouns**.

| | | |
|------------|------------|------------|
| | singular | plural |
| indefinite | a | - |
| definite | the | the |

Normally, when there is a **noun**, there is an **article** before it. Articles indicate that a noun is coming.

a car
a company
the car
the company

The **indefinite article** is used when it is not clear which item, which one of this sort of thing, is referred to. The item is not defined. (More about the **definite article** on page 4, [The indefinite article](#).)

Do you have **a** pen for me?
Which pen is not defined, it is not important. It can be any pen.

Tomorrow we will interview **a** new candidate for the position.
It has not been specified which candidate.

The **definite article** is used when it is clear which item, which one of this sort of thing, is referred to. The item is defined. (More about the **definite article** on page 4, [The definite article](#)).

Please, put **the** dictionary back on **the** shelf when you're finished.
It is clear which dictionary you have to put back on which shelf. The dictionary is the one you have taken or are using. The shelf is the one where you took it from or where you know it is stored.

If you don't understand the explanation in the book, ask the teacher.
In a normal class situation there is only one teacher. That is the teacher you should ask. It is clear that the mentioned book is the book used in class and that the explanation is the one to be studied or referred to at that moment.

In some cases, like when using numbers or other indicators of quantity, **articles** are not necessary. Like articles they indicate that a **noun** is coming (more on page 8, at [Articles and quantity expressions](#)).

There are **twenty-three** company cars available for representatives.
They have **one** beautiful red company car for special occasions.
My brother has **many** vinyl Blues records.

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Recognising a noun and its modifiers

Articles are **determiners**. **Determiners** include articles, words indicating quantity, possession, pointing out. Like other **determiners**, **articles** help to recognise **nouns**. Apart from showing that a **noun** is coming they also help to recognise part of a sentence which modifies, gives extra information about, the **noun**.

Article showing a word is an adjective

Adjectives for instance are placed between **article** or other **determiner** and **noun**.

the red car
a big tree

The words **car** and **tree** are **nouns**. The words between the **article** and the **noun**, **red** and **big** are **adjectives**. **Adjectives** are words that give extra information about **nouns**. **Red** gives extra information about the **car**, which colour it has. **Big** gives extra information about the **tree**, what size it is.

This principle is helpful when there is a sequence of words which can be **nouns**, **adjectives** or **adverbs**. The order of such words shows which is a **noun** and which are adjectives or adverbs. When an article is followed by a group of words which can be **nouns**, adjectives or adverbs, the last one in the sequence is the **noun** and the others are adjectives or adverbs. The adjectives give extra information about the **noun** directly. The adverbs give extra information about the adjectives and like that, indirectly about the **noun**.

a company car
Here, **car** is the **noun**, **company** is an **adjective**. It is a car. It is not a company. This is a car that belongs to a company.
a car company
Here **company** is the **noun**, **car** is an **adjective**. It is a company. It is not a car. This is a company which produces cars.

Article showing words are adjectives or adverb

When a sentence has more than three words which can be **nouns**, **adjectives** or **adverbs**, then **articles** help to show which word has which function. One **article** is followed by one **noun**. If an **article** is followed by more words that can be **nouns**, only the last one really is a **noun**. All words between this **article** and this **noun** are **adjectives** or **adverbs**.

the beautiful red company car
Here, **car** is the **noun**. The words **beautiful**, **red** and **company** are **adjectives**.
a very successful big car company
Here, **company** is the **noun**. The words **successful**, **big** and **car** are **adjectives**. The word **very** is an **adverb**. The word **very** gives extra information about **successful** and like that, only indirectly, about **company**.

Articles also shows where such groups of **adjectives**, **adverbs** and one **noun** begin.

Compare the following sentences.

Smith has **a** company, **a** computer and **an** office.
Jones has **a** company computer and **an** office.

These sentences communicate that Smith has a company, Jones doesn't have a company. In the first sentence, the **articles** together with the **commas** show that **company** and **computer** are both **nouns**. Both of these things belong to Smith. In the second sentence, the absence of **article** and **comma** between the words **company** and **computer** show that **company** is an **adjective** which gives information about **computer**. It means that Jones has a computer which belongs to the company. Since a **comma** can only be heard as a pause, the **article** is the most important indication of the function and meaning of the words **company** and **computer**.

Tuesday I have to take **a** computer, **a** bag and **a** projector.

This means I have to take three things: 1) a computer, 2) a bag, 3) a projector. This can be because I have to give a guest presentation. The presentation is stored on my computer and there where I am going to give the presentation, they don't have a projector.

Wednesday I have to take **a** computer bag and **a** projector.

This means I have to take two things: 1) a special bag to carry a computer, 2) a projector. This can be because I have to give a presentation at my work. That is why I am taking the computer bag. My computer I left at my work and I need to bring it home after work. The projector at my work is reserved so I am going to take mine.

Article showing a word is a verb

In certain cases the position of the article can show if one of the words is an adjective or a verb. In the following example this will happen in oral communication. When the sentences are written down, the difference in spelling shows that **red** is an **adjective** informing the colour and **read** is a **verb**. That is why both sentences are also given in phonetic writing. Look at the phonetic transcription to see that, in oral communication, the only difference is the position of the article [ðə]¹.

Jaime has the red book.

[ˌdʒeɪmɪː hæz ðə ˌrɛd bʊk]

Jaime has read the book.

[ˌdʒeɪmɪː hæz ˌrɛd ðə bʊk]

The first sentence means Jaime has a book of which the listener or reader knows which one it is because it has a red colour.

The second sentence means there is a book of which the listener or reader knows which one it is and that Jaime should know what it is about because he did read it (in the past).

¹In this hand-out, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) from the International Phonetic Association (also IPA) is used. To hear the sounds which are indicated by the characters of the IPA, click on the symbols in one of the following IPA charts.

www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/IPAcharts/inter_chart_2018/IPA_2018.html

or

www.seeingspeech.ac.uk/ click on [IPA charts]

The definite article

As said, the **definite article** is used when it is clear which item of a group, all things indicated with the **noun**, is referred to. This can be clear because, in the context, there is only one of that kind or because it has already been made clear which item of the group is referred to.

Can you, please, put the flowers on the kitchen table?

In most situations there is only one kitchen table and the flowers are the ones that you are carrying, bringing or something like that.

The king has died. Long live the king.

In the normal context of one country there is only one king. When the king dies, the crown prince automatically and right away becomes the new king. Worth mentioning is that any of these kings could be a queen.

The indefinite article

The **indefinite article**, **a**, is derived from but not the same as the number **one**. The **indefinite article**, **a**, indicates that the exact quantity is not important. It means something like, there may be one, there probably is one but that it is also possible that there are more than one. In the following examples, pay attention to what can happen when using the number **one** instead of the **article a**.

A normal request is:

Could you lend me a pen, please?

Some normal positive answers are:

Yes, of course.

Here you are.

Sure.

Asking:

Could you lend me **one** pen, please?

You might get an answer like:

Are you sure you want only one?

If you ask a physicist a question like:

Do you have **one** book about physics?

You run the risk of getting an answer like:

No ... I have many books about physics.

If you ask a physician:

Do you have **a** book about pathology?

You may get an answer like:

Yes, I do. Do you want to borrow one.

Well, as a matter of fact, I have many books about pathology. Would you like to look at any of them?

Look at the following dialogues.

A: Do you have **a** history book?
 (Maybe you do have a book, maybe you don't.)
 A: Do you have **one** geography book?
 A: I need **an** eraser.
 (Normally one eraser will do but more than one is not a problem.)
 A: I need **one** eraser.

B: Yes, I do.

B: Well, ... I have four.
 B: Here you are.

B: Are you sure you don't need two, or more?

Infos

No indefinite article with plural or uncountable

The fact that the **indefinite article, a**, is derived from the number *one* explains why it *isn't used with plural or uncountable*. Plural is more than one (plural > 1), so it is not one and can not be one (plural ≠ 1). Something that cannot be counted can not be any number. One is a number so an uncountable cannot be one. That is why the **indefinite article, a** isn't used with plural or uncountable words.

Although the **definite article the** can be used with plural and uncountable **nouns**, as explained earlier (page 4, [The definite article](#)), doing so only makes sense when it is clear which of the group are indicated with the **nouns**. Sometimes, the **indefinite article** cannot be used because the **noun** is plural or uncountable but the **definite article** can also not be used because it doesn't make sense in that context. This causes the logical conflict that although an **article** should be used nor the **indefinite** nor the **definite article** can be used. In such cases, the only possibility is breaking the grammar rule by not using an **article** although in principle one should be used.

I need to buy glue to fix some chairs.

Not: I need to buy **a** glue to fix some chairs.

(glue is uncountable.)

I need new audio editing software.

Not: I need **a** new audio editing software.

(software is uncountable.)

This is important information.

Not: This is **an** important information.

(information is uncountable.)

Exceptions, uncountable or countable

Like always, there are exceptions. In a café or restaurant it is normal to ask for **one coffee** or **a coffee** because it is short for *one cup of coffee* or *a cup of coffee*. Coffee is uncountable but cups are countable. A cup is the unit by which coffee is offered and sold. This is also why it is strange to offer *one coffee* to your guest at home. At home, the quantity is not important. In principle, your guest can have as much coffee as she or he wants. Normally one says: **Would you like some coffee?**

Both articles have two forms

Both the **indefinite** and **definite article** have two forms. The **indefinite article** has the forms **a** and **an**. The two forms of the **definite article** only differ in pronunciation, **the** [ðə] and **the** [ði:].

Connected speech: *a* or *an*, pronunciation of *the*

The use of **a** or **an** and the pronunciation of **the** [ðə] or [ði], depends on the following sound, the first sound of the word following the **article**. If the first letter of the following word is pronounced as a **consonant** [ðə] (the) or **a** should be used, if it is pronounced as a **vowel** [ði:] (the) or **an** are used.

The reason these rules exist is **connected speech**. In English, most of the time, words are pronounced together without leaving gaps. In the pronunciation they are joined, they are connected. This **connected speech** is so important in English that both **articles** have two forms so they can always be pronounced together with the following word without a pause in between. As explained above, it is the first sound of the word following the **article** that determines which form of the **articles** should be used. To notice how this works, try to pronounce **article** and following word using **a** when you should use **an** or [ðə] (the) when you should use [ði:] (the). You will find out that it is very difficult or impossible to pronounce them together without a pause.

| | | | |
|----|----------|---------------|----------|
| a | pear | (the) [ðə] | pear |
| an | apple | (the) [ði:] | apple |
| a | chair | (the) [ðə] | chair |
| an | umbrella | (the) [ði:] | umbrella |
| an | opening | (the) [ði:] | opening |
| a | ball | (the) [ðə] | ball |
| an | insider | (the) [ði:] | insider |

Important is the sound not the letter

Some words start with a **consonant sound** while the first letter is normally seen as a **vowel letter** and some words start with a **vowel sound** while the first letter is normally seen as a **consonant letter**. But, as said, what determines the form of the article is the following sound not the following letter.

Look at these examples.

| letter | sound |
|--------|--------------|
| y | [j i:] |
| u | [ju: ^] |
| h | [h: |
| | (silent)] |

| | | |
|------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| a year | (the) [ðə] year | ['jiə(ɪ)] |
| a user | (the) [ðə] user | ['ju:zə(ɪ)] |
| an upgrade | (the) [ði:] upgrade | ['ʌpgreɪd] |
| a house | (the) [ðə] house | [haʊs] |
| an hour | (the) [ði:] hour | [aʊə(ɪ)] |

Some words, like **herb** and **hotel**, can be pronounced in two ways. The choice between **a** or **an** depends on the pronunciation the writer has in mind and the pronunciation of **the** depends on the pronunciation the reader uses.

| | | | | |
|----------|---------------|-----------|----------------|------|
| a herb | [ə hɜ:(ɪ)b] | the herb | [ðə hɜ:(ɪ)b] | (US) |
| an herb | [ən ɜ:ɪb] | the herb | [ði: ɜ:ɪb] | |
| a hotel | [ə həʊ'tel] | the hotel | [ðə həʊ'tel] | |
| an hotel | [ən əʊ'tel] | the hotel | [ði: əʊ'tel] | |

Important is not the noun but the following word

What determines the form of the **article** is the sound that follows it, the first sound of the following word. This is not always the **noun**, it can also be an **adjective** or **adverb**.

| | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| an apple | a big apple |
| (the) [ði] apple | (the) [ðə] big apple |
| an apartment | a small apartment |
| (the) [ði] apartment | (the) [ðə] small apartment |
| a car | an enormous car |
| (the) [ðə] car | (the) [ði] enormous car |
| a tool | a useful tool |
| (the) [ðə] tool | (the) [ðə] useful tool |
| an extremely useful tool | (the) [ði] extremely useful tool |

Infos

The use of indefinite and definite article

Often things, ideas or persons are introduced in a more general sense. With singular **nouns** this goes together with using the **indefinite article**. With plural or uncountable **nouns**, the **indefinite article** cannot be used which is why, in this case, no **article** is used. Later in the conversation, that what has been introduced and thereby defined can be referred to by using the **noun** with the **definite article**.

Example, plain.

After a few kilometres, we came to **a** small *village*. **The** *village* had **a** *church* and **a** *café* in front of **the** *church*. We went into **the** *café* to see if they had anything to eat. They had *sandwiches*, *fried eggs* and *pancakes*. We tried **the** *sandwiches* and **the** *pancakes*. **The** *sandwiches* were good but we didn't like **the** *pancakes*.

Example with explanation.

After a few kilometres, we came to **a** small *village*. [at this moment it is still one of many villages] **The** *village* [now it is clear which village is meant; it is the one where we had arrived] had **a** *church* [now still one of many churches] and **a** *café* [now still one of many cafés] in front of **the** *church*. [now it is clear which church is meant; it is the one in that village] We went into **the** *café* [now it is clear which café; the one in front of the church] to see if they had anything to eat. They had *sandwiches*, *fried eggs* and *pancakes*. [now still any group of sandwiches, fried eggs, pancakes of all that can exist; no indefinite article because of plural] We tried **the** *sandwiches* and **the** *pancakes*. [these are the sandwiches and pancakes served in that café] **The** *sandwiches* were good but we didn't like **the** *pancakes*. [these are the sandwiches and pancakes we received and ate]

Articles and other determiners

Articles belong to the **determiners**. One of the functions of **determiners** is indicating that a **noun** is coming. **Indefinite articles** are not used together with other determiners because all of them indicate that a **noun** is coming. It makes an **indefinite article** unnecessary and even redundant. **Definite articles** are not used when other expressions indicate clear enough that a **noun** is coming as well as which item of the group it refers to. These expressions can be other

determiners like **possessive**, **indicative**, **numbers**, they can be expressions that give imprecise indications of quantities, and also any **possessive** form.

We prefer that table.

Not : ~~We prefer the that table.~~

Not : ~~We prefer that the table.~~

Where is Barney's bicycle?

Not: ~~Where is Barney's the bicycle?~~

Not: ~~Where is the Barney's bicycle?~~

Not: ~~Where is Barney's a bicycle?~~

Not: ~~Where is a Barney's bicycle?~~

Whose bicycle is that?

Not: ~~Whose a bicycle is that?~~

Not: ~~Whose the bicycle is that?~~

That is her bicycle.

Not: ~~That is the her bicycle.~~

Not: ~~That is a her bicycle.~~

Not: ~~That is her a bicycle.~~

Do you remember where we parked our car?

Not: ~~Do you remember where we parked the our car?~~

Not: ~~Do you remember where we parked our the car?~~

Enfos

Articles and quantity expressions

Quantity expressions or **quantifiers** are **determiners**, just like **articles**. That is why an **article** is not needed when there is a quantity expression. Quantity expressions can be cardinal numbers, including the number **one** but also subjective or vague indicators of quantity like many, some, a lot. Because **quantifiers** indicate a quantity *different from one* or the quantity of *exactly one*, it doesn't make sense to use these words together with the **indefinite article**, **a**. That is why normally the **indefinite article** is not used with **quantifiers**. Using the **definite article** together with quantity expressions is possible.

Mary has five guitars.

Not: Mary has ~~a~~ five guitars.

That bar serves many beers.

Not: That bar serves ~~a~~ many beers.

Roger has one bicycle. He used to have several but now he has only one.

Not: Roger has ~~a~~ one bicycle.

Not: Roger has one ~~a~~ bicycle.

The **definite article** can be used with quantity words.

The five guitars of Mary are acoustic.

Not: ~~**A** five guitars of Mary are acoustic.~~

Group words

With **nouns** that indicate a group, an **article** is used.

You should buy **a** new **pair** of shoes for the party.

Are they **a** married **couple**?
 Are they **the** married **couple** you were talking about?
 Could you chop **a couple** of onions, please.
 These coaches were pulled by **a team** of horses.



Articles and names

In English, normally no **articles** are used with given names. With a given name, one specific person, animal or thing is indicated. This makes it unnecessary to use the **definite article** to indicate which one of the group is intended, that has already been done with the given name. Using the **definite article** together with a given name would be redundant.

Look, there is Peter, our friend.
 Not: Look, there is **the** Peter, our friend.

I will ask my friend Rose.
 Yes that is a good idea, Rose must know the answer.
 Not: Yes that is a good idea, **the** Rose must know the answer.

Both of the following sentences are correct but they mean something quite different.

Rose is very beautiful.

The rose is very beautiful.

Hearing the first sentence, a listener will think of a beautiful *person* whose name is Rose. Hearing the second sentence, the listener will think of a beautiful *flower*.

Using an **article** with a given name can cause communication problems. Think of someone who is looking for a person named Rose.

When saying the following.

I am looking for the Rose.

A listener will think of a flower and may answer something like this.

Which rose? There are a few roses in the vase on the sideboard.

When looking for the person one should ask:

I am looking for Rose.

The answer will be less surprising. It could be something like:

She went to the hardware store. She should be back in about half an hour.

Definite article, plural family name

When the definite article is used with the plural of a family name, the whole family with that name is referred to.

Some time ago we got new neighbours, the Jetsons. They are really nice.
 The speaker is saying that whole family with the last name Jetson, the new neighbours, are nice.

Plural and descriptive names

Exceptions to the rule of not using **articles** with names are plural and descriptive names. Most of the time plural names are descriptive names. One could say they are descriptions which are used as names which is the reason why normally the **definite article** is used with this kind of names. Many countries and organisations have such plural or descriptive names. Names that contain the **preposition of** are normally descriptive names.

Country names

Some countries have a singular, non descriptive name as well as a plural, descriptive name. Often the most commonly used name is the singular, non descriptive name which does not take an **article**.

Brazil is the most commonly used name for the country of which the official name is a descriptive name that takes an **article**, **the Federal Republic of Brazil**.

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------------|
| Brazil | the Federal Republic of Brazil, |
| Indonesia | the Republic of Indonesia, |
| Belgium | the Kingdom of Belgium, |

Examples in sentences.

Brazil has a big variety of climates, from temperate in the south to tropical in the north.

Not: ~~The Brazil has a big variety of climates, from temperate in the south to tropical in the north.~~

In Brazil there are many native forests.

Not: In ~~the~~ Brazil there are many native forests.

The Congo

An exception to the above patterns is, **the Congo**. It is a singular name but it is used with an **article**. Actually there are two countries that can be called **the Congo**, namely the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo. The use of the **definite article** can be explained by seeing **the Congo** as a short form of the countries full descriptive names.

Apparently the river gets its name from a word from Bantu (a southern African language group) which means *mountains*. So the name, **the Congo River** means *the river coming from the mountains*. This leads the name back to a plural geographical or descriptive name which explains the use of the **definite article**. Peculiar is that alternative names for these countries, Congo-Kinshasa for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Congo-Brazzaville for the Republic of the Congo, do not take the **definite article**.

Articles with other geographic names

With names of for instance mountain ranges, rivers and seas, normally **articles** are used. This could be explained by seeing these geographical names as a short form of descriptive names.

short name

the Nile
the Caucasus
the Amazon
the Mediterranean
the Himalayas

full descriptive name

the River Nile,
the Caucasus Mountain Ridge,
the Amazon Forest or the River Amazon,
the Mediterranean Sea or Mediterranean Basin,
the Himalaya mountains.

Names of buildings

With names of buildings, there are so many exceptions that one could argue that there aren't really any rules.

Shipnames

Still at least one peculiar exception remains. It is common to use the **definite article** with names of ships.

Mutiny on **the** Bounty.

The Titanic sunk on its maiden voyage.

Articles in idiomatic expressions

Sometimes there can be a difference in meaning of a **noun**, depending on if it is used with an **indefinite article**, a **definite article** or no **article** at all. When neither the **definite** nor the **indefinite article** or any other **determiner** is used with a **noun**, this can be to indicate one of the following: the most normal meaning of the word in every day life, the general idea or concept of the **noun** or to refer to the group indicated by the **noun** as a whole. The definite article indicates a special individual or item from the group indicated by the **noun**. The indefinite article indicates, as always, any individual or item from the group indicated by the **noun**.

man

the man

a man

the human species, there is only one human species

that man we are referring to

a male individual from the human species

life

the life

a life

the concept of life, life as a whole

the life of a person an individual

a type of life or a kind of life that a person, an individual can have

school

the school

a school

the school where one is a pupil or teacher, the institution in a general sense

somebody else's school: **the** school of John, **the** school in the new neighbourhood.

any (possible) school: When we move, we need to find **a** good school for the kids.

Difference between *few*, *a few*, *little* and *a little*

With the quantifiers ***few*** and ***little***, the use of an article or not causes an important difference in meaning. The expression ***a few*** simply means, *a small number* while ***few*** indicates *hardly any* or *an insignificant number*.

At the exposition there were ***a few*** guests but they showed much interest. They even bought some pieces.

(There were not many guests but they were important enough.)

A CD store is an interesting business but in that village, you will have ***few*** customers.

(Starting a CD store in that village will be risky because that quantity of customers will be too small to survive.)

The same principle applies to ***little*** and ***a little*** but ***few*** is used for countable and ***little*** is used for uncountable.

If you pass anywhere near a bakery, can you buy some bread? There is just a little left.

(The quantity of bread is small but probably will do for one or two meals.)

We understand the problem but there is little we can do about it.

(What we can do if anything, is not going to be enough.)

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