

English Language Institute(ELI)

ELCS 102

Level 5- Grammar

Definite and Indefinite Articles

What is an article?

Basically, an article is an adjective. Like adjectives, articles modify nouns.

English has two articles: **the** and **a/an**. **The** is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; **a/an** is used to modify non-specific or non-particular nouns. We call **the** the *definite* article and **a/an** the *indefinite* article.

the = definite article

a/an = indefinite article

For example, if I say, "Let's read **the** book," I mean a *specific* book. If I say, "Let's read **a** book," I mean *any* book rather than a specific book.

Here's another way to explain it: **The** is used to refer to a *specific* or *particular* member of a group. For example, "I just saw **the** most popular movie of the year." There are many movies, but only one particular movie is the most popular. Therefore, we use **the**.

"A/an" is used to refer to a *non-specific* or *non-particular* member of the group. For example, "I would like to go see **a** movie." Here, we're not talking about a *specific* movie. We're talking about *any* movie. There are many movies, and I want to see *any* movie. I don't have a specific one in mind.

Let's look at each kind of article a little more closely.

Indefinite Articles: a and an

"A" and "an" signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. For example:

- "My daughter really wants **a** dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog. We don't know which dog because we haven't found the dog yet.
- "Somebody call **a** policeman!" This refers to *any* policeman. We don't need a specific policeman; we need any policeman who is available.
- "When I was at the zoo, I saw **an** elephant!" Here, we're talking about a single, non-specific thing, in this case an elephant. There are probably several elephants at the zoo, but

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there's only *one* we're talking about here.

Remember, using a or an depends on the sound that begins the next word. So...

- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant: **a** boy; **a** car; **a** bike; **a** zoo; **a** dog
- **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: **an** elephant; **an** egg; **an** apple; **an** idiot; **an** orphan
- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: **a** user (sounds like 'yoo-zer,' i.e. begins with a consonant 'y' sound, so 'a' is used); **a** university; **a** unicycle
- In some cases where "h" is pronounced, such as "historical," use **an**:

An historical event is worth recording.

In writing, "a historical event" is more commonly used.

Remember that this rule also applies when you use acronyms:

Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICaP) handles first-year writing at the University.

Therefore, an ICaP memo generally discusses issues concerning English 106 instructors.

Another case where this rule applies is when acronyms start with consonant letters but have vowel sounds:

An MSDS (material safety data sheet) was used to record the data. An SPCC plan (Spill Prevention

Control and Countermeasures plan) will help us prepare for the worst.

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between **a** and **an** depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

- **a** broken egg
- **an** unusual problem
- **a** European country (sounds like 'yer-o-pi-an,' i.e. begins with consonant 'y' sound)

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Remember, too, that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a group:

- I am **a** teacher. (I am a member of a large group known as teachers.)
- Brian is **an** Irishman. (Brian is a member of the people known as Irish.)
- Seiko is **a** practicing Buddhist. (Seiko is a member of the group of people known as Buddhists.)

Definite Article: **the**

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. **The** signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. For example:

"**The** dog that bit me ran away." Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.

"I was happy to see **the** policeman who saved my cat!" Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.

"I saw **the** elephant at the zoo." Here, we're talking about a *specific* noun. Probably there is only one elephant at the zoo.

Count and Noncount Nouns

The can be used with noncount nouns, or the article can be omitted entirely.

- "I love to sail over **the** water" (some specific body of water) or "I love to sail over water" (any water).
- "He spilled **the** milk all over the floor" (some specific milk, perhaps the milk you bought earlier that day) or "He spilled milk all over the floor" (any milk).

"A/an" can be used only with count nouns.

- "I need **a** bottle of water."
- "I need **a** new glass of milk."

Most of the time, you can't say, "She wants a water," unless you're implying, say, a bottle of water.

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Geographical use of **the**

There are some specific rules for using **the** with geographical nouns.

Do not use **the** before:

- names of most countries/territories: *Italy, Mexico, Bolivia*; however, *the Netherlands, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, the United States*
- names of cities, towns, or states: *Seoul, Manitoba, Miami*
- names of streets: *Washington Blvd., Main St.*
- names of lakes and bays: *Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie* except with a group of lakes like *the Great Lakes*
- names of mountains: *Mount Everest, Mount Fuji* except with ranges of mountains like **the Andes** or **the Rockies** or unusual names like **the Matterhorn**
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West) except with island chains like **the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or the Canary Islands**

Do use **the** before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas: **the Nile, the Pacific**
- points on the globe: **the Equator, the North Pole**
- geographical areas: **the Middle East, the West**
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: **the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula**

Omission of Articles

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Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities:
Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian
(unless you are referring to the population of the nation: "**The** Spanish are known for their warm hospitality.
- Names of academic subjects:
mathematics, biology, history, computer science
- Names of sports: *football, hockey, baseball*

Exercises

Exercises (A)

Fill in the gaps with the correct article (a, an, the, 0) when necessary.

I am from Winchester, Hampshire. Winchester is _____ city in _____ United Kingdom. I live in _____ town called _____ Taunton which is on _____ River Tone. I live in _____ house in _____ quiet street in _____ countryside. _____ street is called "Hudson Street" and _____ house is more than 100 years old! I am _____ English lecturer at _____ college near _____ center of _____ town. I like _____ books, music and taking _____ photographs. I usually have _____ lunch at college. I usually go -- _____ home _____ by _____ car. We have all kinds of food in _____ England. I like _____ Polish food very much. Sometimes, I go to _____ Polish restaurant in Bath. _____ restaurant is called "Magda's". _____ Polish food is delicious.

Exercise (2)

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1. Robert and Jessica went to ____ party last night.
2. Can you tell me how to get to ____ cinema from here?
3. ____ college is closed today.
4. Gregory is one of ____ strangest people I know.
5. I recommend you try ____ tomato soup at this restaurant.
6. ____ beer is not good for you.
7. Would you like to see ____ film?
8. ____ apple a day keeps ____ doctor away.
9. I can't believe I failed ____ yesterday's test!
10. Do you have ____ dictionary that I can borrow?
11. There were many dogs in the park. One dog was ____
Dalmatian.
12. Pandas and ____ tigers are both endangered animals.
13. Magda is wearing ____ blue dress with red shoes
14. Bornholm is ____ island in the Baltic Sea.
15. Christmas comes once ____ year.
16. ____ owl is ____ bird.
17. The Severn is ____ river.
18. Jane went to the shop to buy ____ bread.
19. Hania broke ____ glass when she was washing-up.

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20.Tom took ____ umbrella as it was raining heavily.

21.This is ____ easy question.

22.Stephen could you speak ____ little louder.

23.May I have your ____ phone number?

24.I have never seen ____ UFO.

25.May I ask you ____ question?

25.Ismail is ____ best teacher in our school.

26What is ____ name of the next station?

27.My friend has ____ my car today.

28.I went to ____ sea during my summer holiday.

29.Is there ____ cash machine near here?

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Answer Key

Exercise (1)

I am from Winchester, Hampshire. Winchester is a city in the United Kingdom. I live in a town called 0 Taunton which is on the River Tone. I live in a house in a quiet street in the countryside. The street is called "Hudson Street" and the house is more than 100 years old! I am an English lecturer at a college near the center of the town. I like 0 books, music and taking 0 photographs. I usually have 0 lunch at college. I usually go 0 home by 0 car. We have all kinds of food in 0 England. I like 0 Polish food very much. Sometimes, I go to a Polish restaurant in Bath. The restaurant is called "Magda's". The Polish food is delicious.

Exercise (2)

1. Robert and Jessica went to a party last night.
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11. There were many dogs in the park. One dog was a
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25. Ismail is the best teacher in our school.

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Hope this detailed information and practice about the usage of articles are detailed and useful to you.

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