

The definite article, 'the', and the indefinite article, 'a/an', may present a challenge for non-native speakers of English. A number of explanations and rules have been designed to allow students of English to familiarise themselves with the notion of articles, and their correct usage. However, it is impossible to anticipate all scenarios via such general rules and observations. *A Practical English Grammar* offers the following explanations regarding articles:

**'a/an** is used:

A Before a singular noun which is countable (i.e. of which there is more than one) when it is mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing:

*I need a visa. They live in a flat. He bought an ice-cream.*

B Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things:

*A car must be insured A child needs love*

C With a noun complement. This includes names of professions:

*It was an earthquake. She'll be a dancer. He is an actor.*

D In certain expressions of quantity:

*A lot of a great many a great deal of a couple a dozen*

E In exclamations before singular, countable nouns:

*Such a long queue! What a pretty girl!*

**Omissions of a/an**

A Before plural nouns.

B Before uncountable nouns

C Before names of meals, except when these are preceded by an adjective:

*We have breakfast at eight. He gave us a good breakfast.*

The article **a/an** is also used when it is a special meal given to celebrate something or in someone's honour:

*I was invited to dinner but I was invited to a dinner given to welcome the new ambassador.*

**The** (the definite article)

A When the object or group of objects is unique or considered to be unique:

*the earth the sea the sky the equator the stars*

B Before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time:

*His car struck a tree; you can still see the mark on the tree.*

C Before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or a clause:

*the girl in blue the man with the banner the boy that I met the place where I met him*

D Before a noun which by reason of locality can represent only one particular thing:

*Ann is in the garden (the garden of this house)*

*Please pass the wine (the wine on the table)*

Similarly: *the postman* (the one who comes to us), *the car* (our car)

## AWC Handouts

### Notes on Article Usage

Compiled by Anna Sikora-Carelse

- E Before superlatives and *first, second* etc. used as adjectives or pronouns, and *only*:  
*The first (week) the best day the only way*
- F **the** + singular noun can represent a class of animals or things:  
*The whale is in danger of becoming extinct.*  
*The deep-freeze has made life easier for housewives.*  
**the** can be used before a member of a certain group of people:  
*The small shopkeeper is finding life increasingly difficult.*
- G before certain proper names of seas, rivers, islands, mountain, deserts, plural names of countries, before adjectives and names consisting of adjective + noun:  
*the Atlantic the Thames the Alps*  
*the Netherlands the Sahara the North Pole*  
*the Cape of Good Hope the United States of America the West End*
- but note:  
*South Africa North America West Germany*

### Omissions of **the**

- A before abstract nouns except when they are used in a particular sense:  
*Men fear death but The death of the Prime Minister left his party without a leader.*
- B Before names of games:  
*He plays golf*
- C Note that in some European languages the definite article is used before indefinite plural nouns but that in English **the** is never used in this way:  
*Women are expected to like babies.* (i.e. women in general) – if we put **the** before *women*, it would mean that we were referring to a particular group of women.
- D **home**: when **home** is used alone, i.e. is not preceded or followed by a descriptive word or phrase, **the** is omitted:  
*He is at home*
- E **bed, church, court, hospital, prison, school/college/university**  
**The** is not used if these places are visited or used for their primary purpose.  
**We go:**  
*to bed* to sleep  
*to church* to pray  
*to hospital* as patients  
*to prison* as prisoners  
When these places are visited or used for other reasons **the** is necessary:  
*I went to the church to see the stained glass.*  
*He goes to the prison to give lectures.*
- F **sea**  
*We go to sea as sailors but we can also live by/near the sea*
- G **work** and **office**  
Work (place of work) is used without **the**: *He's on his way to work.*  
To be *in office* (without **the**) means to hold an official (usually political) position. To be *out of office* = to be no longer in power.'

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Although the above examples offer comprehensible explanations, many ambiguities exist, to which certain rules do not apply. For example, we may refer to:

*in the future*                      *in future*

‘in the future’ is used to describe the time still to come:

*in the future, people will live on the Moon*

‘in future’ is used to describe the time from now on:

*in future, look after yourself*

Even a phrase *in a future* is possible.

Consider this example:

*‘Space Odyssey’ was set in a future now past*

Here, the writer the word future stands for a vision of the future, which why the indefinite article is used.

As the authors of *The Linguistic Structure of Modern English* point out, ‘ article usage in English is complex and in many instances arbitrary (Brinton and Brinton, 123). Even highly advanced speakers of English may occasionally struggle.

To help you overcome this problem, we have included a list of corrected sentences extracted from an otherwise very well written essay. These examples might help you notice similar patterns in your own writing.

*This source cites **the** abolition of slavery as the sole reasons for the Civil War (was: ‘this cites abolition’)*

*Cameroon’s house is gradually stripped of possessions to finance the defence of the South’s ideals (was: ‘stripped of **the** possessions’)*

*These technical innovations intensify the dualism of post-war American society. (was: ‘the dualism of **the** post-war American society’)*

*The development of the narrative relies on **the** exploitation of stereotypes (was: ‘relies on exploitation of stereotypes’)*

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*In Stagecoach (1939), he prevents her from falling victim to vicious criminals (was: 'he prevents her from falling **a** victim')*

*By throwing Auguste scraps in **the** form of personal support, Stipe becomes recognised (was: 'in **a** form of personal support')*

*Loomba explains how the coloniser fears the miscegenation process, as it threatens racial purity (was: '**the** racial purity')*

*Auguste resists the pervasive influence of foreign culture, and becomes **a** political activist for an independent movement (was: 'and becomes political activist')*

*It causes the women to jump off cliffs, yet such **a** death is deemed more honourable (was: 'yet such death')*

Bibliography:

Thompson, A.J. and A. V. Martinet. *A Practical English Grammar*. Fourth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Brinton Laurel J. And Donna Brinton *The Linguistic Structure of Modern English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010.