

63 Articles

Articles are short words which come before nouns to show whether they refer to a general or a specific object. There are several rules telling which article, if any, should be used.

See also:

Singular and plural nouns **69** Countable and uncountable nouns **70** Superlative adjectives **97**

63.1 THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE

The indefinite article "a" or "an" is used to talk about something in general.

I work in **a library**.

"A" is used to talk about the type of place where somebody works, not the specific building.



I work in **an office**.

"An" is used instead of "a" before words that start with a vowel.



The indefinite article is used to talk about a general thing among many of its type. The exact one is not yet known.

We are trying to buy **a house**.

The exact house they will buy is unknown.



The indefinite article is also used to show a noun belongs to a group or category.

Canada is **a very cold country**.

"Country" categorizes Canada, and "cold" describes it.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Dogs make **a great family pet**.



The indefinite article is used in the same way for negative statements.

Jim isn't **an artist**.



Do you want to come to **an exhibition**?

The indefinite article is used in the same way for questions.



Is there **a bank** near here?



63.2 "SOME"

"Some" replaces "a" or "an" in sentences with plural nouns.

Use "a" and "an" to talk about one thing.

"Hotel" is singular.

There is **a hotel** in the town.



There are **some hotels** in the town.



Use "some" to talk about more than one thing.

"Hotels" is plural.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

There are **some banks** on Main Street.



There are **some children** in the park.



63.3 "SOME" AND "ANY" WITH QUESTIONS AND NEGATIVES

"Some" is replaced by "any" to form questions and negatives.

There are **some cafés** in the town.



Are there **any cafés** in the town?



There are **some children** in the park.



There aren't **any children** in the park.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Are there **any museums**?



There aren't **any parks**.



Are there **any swimming pools**?



There aren't **any factories**.



63.4 THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

The definite article “the” is used to talk about a specific person or thing that everyone understands.

We went on a tour and **the guide** was excellent.



It is clear from the context that this means the tour guide.

When a person or thing has been mentioned already, “the” is used the next time the thing or person is talked about.

There’s a bus trip or a lecture. I’d prefer **the bus trip**.



The bus trip has already been mentioned.

The definite article is used before superlatives.

The Colosseum is probably **the most famous** site in Rome.



Superlative phrase.

The definite article is also used with unique objects.

I’m going to **the Trevi Fountain** before I leave.



There is only one Trevi Fountain.

It is also used for people with unique titles.

The Pope is visiting another country this week.



“Pope” is a title.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

What is **the biggest country** in the world?



I never take **the first train** to work in the morning.



I love this restaurant. **The waiters** are great.



I went to Paris and climbed **the Eiffel Tower**.



Did you buy those shoes from **the shoe shop** on Broad Lane?



The President will be speaking on TV tonight.



63.5 USING "THE" TO SPECIFY

"The" can be followed by a prepositional phrase or a defining relative clause to specify which thing someone is talking about.

The pictures **on the wall** are beautiful.



This makes it clear which pictures are being referred to.

The dog **that I saw earlier** was adorable.



This makes it clear which dog is being talked about.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

The computers **in this office** are all too slow.



The books **that I bought yesterday** are for my son's birthday.



The students **in my classes** are very intelligent and dedicated.



The pastries **that they sell here** are absolutely delicious.



63.6 "THE" WITH ADJECTIVES FOR CERTAIN GROUPS

Some adjectives can be used with the definite article to refer to a group or class of people.

Rich people have bought most of the new houses in this town.



Almost all the houses here are owned by **the rich**.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Emergency treatment for **the injured** is essential.



The media sometimes portrays **the young** as lazy.



Many charities try to protect **the poor**.



The elderly often need the support of their families.



TIP

These phrases are plural in meaning, but it's incorrect to say "the youngs," etc.

63.7 THE ZERO ARTICLE

An article is not needed with uncountable and plural nouns used in a general context. This is known as the zero article.

I don't like the beach.
I get **sand** everywhere.

Uncountable noun.

Plural noun.



You can see **famous sights** all over New York City.



The zero article is also used with some places and institutions when it is clear what their purpose is.

Liz is seven. She goes **to school** now.

She goes there to study, which is the purpose of schools, so no article is used.



Larry works at **the school** in Park Street.

The definite article is used to talk about the specific school where he works.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Coffee is one of Colombia's major exports.



Kangaroos are common in Australia.



I am studying Engineering **in college** in Chicago.



Liz goes **to school** at 8am.



In the UK, **children** start school when they are five years old.



I've got so many **books**.



Paris is the capital of France.

Names of places often take the zero article.



Go **to bed**, Tom!




63.8 THE ZERO ARTICLE AND GENERIC "THE"

The zero article can be used with plural nouns to talk about a class of things in general. This can also be done with the definite article, plus a singular noun.


Referring to an invention, not an individual telescope.

Telescopes
The telescopes } changed the way we see the night sky.




Referring to a species of animal, not an individual animal.

Cheetahs
The cheetahs } can run faster than any other land animal.



Referring to a type of musical instrument, not an individual instrument.

Violins are
The violin is } often the key instrument in an orchestra.



63.9 DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES WITH NAMES

The zero article is normally used with the name of a person.


This is my uncle, **Neil Armstrong**.



The definite article is used before a person's name to differentiate them from another person with the same name.

In this case, "the" is pronounced "thee."

He's not **the Neil Armstrong**, is he?
[He isn't the famous person with that name, is he?]



The indefinite article is used when the focus is on a particular name, rather than the person.

I'm afraid there isn't a **"Joseph Bloggs"** on the list.
[The particular name given is not on the list.]

