

Articles

Adapted from "First Certificate Language Practice" by Michael Vince

Explanations

Indefinite article • With something we refer to for the first time.

(a/an)

*I've just had **a great idea**. I'll give you **a call** next week.*

- With one of a group of things.

*Shall we choose **a book** from this catalogue?*

- Where we use an adjective to describe a noun.

*Cairo is **a very big city**. It's **a beautiful day**.*

- With someone's job.

*Peter is **a truck driver**.*

- With singular fractions, group numbers and large numbers.

*one and **a half** kilos **a dozen** eggs **a hundred** envelopes*

- Meaning *per*.

*He was doing ninety miles **an hour**.*

*Julie earns £500 **a week**.*

Definite article

(the)

• With nouns we have mentioned previously.
*There is a bedroom and a living room. **The bedroom** is quite large.*

- With nouns we mention for the first time, but where it is clear which person or thing we are talking about.

*Can you pass **the marmalade**?*

*My life changed completely after **the war**.*

- Where there is only one of something. It is clear which one we are talking about.

***The moon** is full tonight.*

- With nouns followed by a descriptive phrase, which makes them definite.

*This is **the man** I told you about.*

See also the examples in brackets in the next section, paragraphs 4 and 7. This category includes proper names with a descriptive

phrase. Compare with the next section, paragraph 2:

*London Bridge BUT **the** Tower of London*

- With national groups.

***The British** drink far too much tea.*

- With classes of people.

***The rich** get richer and **the poor** get poorer.*

- With individual items which represent a class.

***The lion** is fast disappearing.*

- With names of musical instruments that we can play.

*I can't play **the piano** but I can play **the guitar**.*

- With some geographical names. In particular: oceans, seas, rivers, canals and regions.

***The Thames** flows into **the North Sea**.
the Arctic*

Also with plural countries, or where the country name contains a noun.

the Netherlands** **the People's Republic of China

- With superlatives, ordinals, *the same*, *the only*.

*This is **the best**. You are **the first**. This is **the only one**.*

- With media.

*What's on **(the) television**? I went to **the cinema**.*

- With uncountable nouns and plural countable nouns when we are talking generally.

Zero article

(No article)

*Give **peace** a chance. Football is **life**.
I hate **wasps**. All he talks about is **cars**.*

- With most continents, countries, states, islands, mountains, lakes, cities, parks, roads and streets, squares, bridges, palaces, castles, cathedrals, stations and airports.

*We live in **France**.*

*We took the train from **Paddington Station** to **Bath**.*

But see previous section, paragraph 9, for geographical names that use the definite article.

- With company names, years, months, days and special times of the year.

*She works for **Lufthansa**.*

*I'll see you in **January**.*

- With names of meals when we are talking generally.

*It's time for **lunch**.* (BUT *The lunch I had at Cafe Sol was good value.*)

*What's for **dinner**?* (BUT *The dinner Sue gave us last night was delicious.*)

- With unique jobs or roles (the definite article is also possible in these cases).

*Jim is (the) **chairman** of the company.*

- With prepositions of place with certain buildings, where the purpose of the building is more important than the place itself.

*Sally is in **prison**.* (She's a prisoner.)

*Sally is in **the prison**.*

(She's a visitor to that specific building)

Similar are: *bed, church, class, court, hospital, school, university*

- With means of transport when we are talking generally.

*We went there by **car**.*

(BUT *We went there in **the car** that Alex borrowed.*)

Note that if we use *in* or *on*, we need an indefinite article.

*We went there **in a car/on a bus**.*

Key points

1 With some types of building, the meaning can change depending on the use of the article.

Helen is at school.

(the purpose of the school is important - Helen is a student or a teacher)

Helen is at the school.

(the building itself is important - it is the place where we can find Helen)

2 The use of the article can show something about the context of a short piece of text. In particular, whether an item has or has not been mentioned before.

*The BBC reported that **the** two men have since been recaptured.*

Use of *the* shows that the two men have been mentioned before, and so this is an extract from a longer text.

3 Many uses of articles are idiomatic, and should be learned as part of a phrase.

Diana works as a graphic designer.