

# Articles: THE, A/AN, and no article

Articles are usually thought of as a special type of adjective that tell the reader whether a particular object or idea is meant, a general or typical one, or some other key information. A misuse of articles, though a small error, is very confusing for a native English speaker.

## I. The definite article THE

Use the definite article with these conditions:

a.	For musical instruments.	Marie plays the cello, and Nazim plays the piano.
b.	For superlatives.	Shiu-Kay was the best Math student at his secondary school this year. May cat is the worst behaved pet in the house.
c.	For unique objects, or when only one exists.	The sun is the centre of the earth's orbit.
d.	When speaking about a species in a scientific way.	The giant panda is in danger of extinction as is the pronghorn antelope.
e.	When describing a class or a group.	The rich love to shop at malls. The lazy prefer to avoid fatigue. The student loves to study.
f.	When referring to public places in a general way.	I have to go to the store. Amir needs to go to the bank.
g.	When the location or established context means that only one exists or that the recipient can decide which one of several is probable.	(e.g. your house) Christine is in the backyard. Liam is in the washroom. Carlos is in the kitchen. (e.g. the park) Cindy is on the swings, Lee is on the monkey bars, and Jake is on the soccer field.
h.	With titles and place names that have the idea of <i>of</i> .	Most of the United States is south of Canada.
i.	When the object or person is mentioned for a second time (an anaphoric reference).	I saw a beautiful cat in my neighbour's window last week. But I haven't seen the cat since.
j.	When we make something definite, often by giving additional or precise information.	I find the book with the Matisse print on the cover quite attractive. I want the vegetarian burger with cheese.
k.	When the reader knows the object or person.	Where's the car parker? What's the matter?

Try this little quiz on the use of the definite article. Be sure to give the letter or reason why the definite article is used in the following sentences.

1. The North American teenager is often bombarded with consumer advertising.
2. I prefer the philosophy course that meets in the 2-2 hour blocks on Monday and Wednesday afternoons.
3. Minnie likes to listen to the violin.
4. Elizabeth II, the Queen, leads a difficult domestic life.
5. I have to go to the library sometime and find a few references.
6. "Over the Moon" makes the best lemon sorbet I have ever tasted.
7. What's the problem with John? He looks miserable.
8. The orca is more commonly known as the killer whale.
9. My mother can't come to the phone right now. She's in the shower.
10. I went to Margareta's Store, and a sales clerk offered to help me. The clerk spent a lot of time talking with me.

## II. The indefinite article (A/An)

Use the indefinite article under all conditions that don't fit either the definite article or zero article, such as:

- When using a singular count noun in a generic sense or to make generalizations. You are using the noun to represent a whole class of them, not any one, specific, or real noun.

*Examples:*      A banana is a good source of potassium.  
                      I ride a bike to work.  
                      Alex always carries a book when she goes out.

### III. The zero article, or no article at all

Use neither **the** nor **a/an** with a noun under these conditions:

a.	When referring to most names of towns, cities, lakes, countries, or continents.	Canada was ranked as one of the most desirable countries in the world to inhabit. People often forget that Mexico is part of North America.
b.	When referring to academic subjects.	English is usually a requirement for a post-secondary degree. Physical Geography is a difficult course.
c.	When referring to count nouns in general, you always use the plural.	Dogs must be on a leash in public places. Snakes are not affectionate creatures.
d.	When referring to games.	My son loves to play chess and soccer.
e.	When referring to certain places but meaning the institutional function of that place.	O.J. Simpson is in prison (no particular prison is meant, only the fact of his incarceration). Marie is in hospital with a broken leg (we don't know which hospital, only that she is hospitalised).
f.	When referring to meals (but if you modify or use an adjective to describe the meal, use the indefinite article).	I am miserable if I skip breakfast. My daughter likes lunch best of all. Breakfast is essential to good health. A healthy breakfast need not be filling.
g.	When using abstract nouns in a general sense, the singular is always used.	Love makes the world go around. Anger is an exhausting emotion.
h.	When using non count nouns in general.	Milk is the same price in all the major grocery stores. Good lumber is expensive.
i.	When using plural count nouns in general.	Oranges are a good source of vitamin C.

Now try this little quiz on the absence of the article. Be sure to give the letter or reason why no article is used in the following sentences.

1. I enjoy watching baseball at Nat Bailey Stadium
2. Beauty is often thought to be a visual representation of inherent goodness.
3. Reilly wants to study medicine.
4. Jake doesn't like school, but realises that he has to go.
5. If I skip lunch, I find that I get sleepy before 3 o'clock when my blood sugar drops.
6. Gas is a big expense for car owners. So, of course, is insurance.
7. El Salvador is surpassingly beautiful, and filled with gorgeous, clear lakes.
8. Iguanas should not be sold as pets. They get big, dangerous, and ill-tempered as they mature.
9. Stellar Jays love peanuts.