

What is an Article?

The words 'a' and 'the' basically mean 'one'. For example, if there is one cat in your garden you can say, *'There is a cat in my garden.'*

We use the article **A/AN** when we are talking about **one** thing. This basically means that we don't use a/an with uncountable nouns or plurals; we only use a/an with singular countable nouns. For example, the following sentences are wrong, as they should not contain 'the'.

X *My husband loves a science.* ('Science' is uncountable.)

X *Frogs eat an insects.* ('Insects' is plural)

What is the Difference Between 'A' and 'The'?

We use 'a' when it is not clear to the reader/listener exactly which thing we are talking about; we use 'the' when it is clear to the reader/listener exactly which thing we are talking about.

Example 1.

a. *I'm going to a restaurant in Soho tonight.*

b. *I'm going to the restaurant in Soho tonight.*

If I say sentence **a** it means I don't think the listener knows exactly which restaurant I am going to. However, if I say sentence **b** it means that I think the listener does know exactly which restaurant I mean, perhaps because we have talked about this restaurant before, or been there together in the past.

Example 2.

a. *Let's meet at a cafe in Trafalgar Square.*

b. *Let's meet at the Starbucks in Trafalgar Square.*

If I say sentence **a** it is unclear to the listener exactly which cafe I mean. However, if I say sentence **b** it is clear to the listener exactly which cafe I mean, as there is only one Starbucks in Trafalgar Square.

Example 3.

a. *There is a cat in my garden.*

b. *Look at the cat in my garden!*

In sentence **a** I say 'a cat' because there are millions of cats in the world and the listener does not know which one is in my garden. In sentence **b** I use 'the cat' because the listener knows exactly which cat I want him to look at.

Using 'The' with Plural and Uncountable Nouns

The article 'the' can be used with plural and uncountable nouns if you are referring to one group/kind/example etc.

Example 1.

a. *The wine glasses on that shelf were a wedding gift.*

b. *Knives and forks go in that drawer.*

In sentence **a** we must use 'the'. Although 'wine glasses' is plural we are talking about one specific set of wine glasses. Only those exact wine glasses were a wedding gift. In sentence **b** we are talking about knives and forks in general, so we don't need 'the'. Essentially we are saying '*that is the cutlery drawer.*'

Example 2.

a. *History is an interesting subject.*

b. *The history of China is an interesting subject.*

Example 3.

a. *X The black cats are unlucky.*

b. *✓ Black cats are unlucky.*

You might think sentence **a** is correct because we are talking about one kind of cat: black cats. However, we are talking generally about all black cats, so we should not use 'the'.

Example 4.

a. *✓ People in Asia mostly have dark hair.*

b. *✓ The people in Asia mostly have dark hair.*

In this case both ways are acceptable. Technically 'the people in Asia' means the exact people in Asia right now, while 'people in Asia' means the people in Asia at any given time.

However, as Asia is such a large place, for all intents and purposes the two sentences mean the same thing.

Example 5.

- a. *The ruling was a victory for workers.*
- b. *The ruling was a victory for the workers.*

Both sentences are grammatically correct, but they mean different things. Sentence **a** seems to be about general employment law, while sentence **b** seems to be about a dispute between the workers and management of one **particular** company.

‘The Supermarket’, ‘The Pub’ etc.

Example 1.

- a. *We’re going to a pub but we haven’t decided which one.*
- b. *We’re going to the pub but we haven’t decided which one.*

You might think that sentence **b** is wrong, but actually both sentences are correct. The phrase ‘going to the pub’ really means ‘going out to drink alcohol’. As in example 1, the focus is on the activity rather than the place.

Example 2.

- a. *I need to go to a supermarket.*
- b. *I need to go to the supermarket.*

Although both sentences are grammatically correct, sentence **b** is more common. Again, the phrase ‘go to the supermarket’ emphasises the activity: buying groceries. By contrast, in sentence **a** the focus is on the supermarket itself, like it’s an emergency.

This kind of construction is used in many cases. For example, ‘going to the doctor’, ‘going to the cinema’, ‘going to the park’. In every case it is the activity you will do at the place, rather than the place itself, that is the focus of attention. The activities in question are commonplace and familiar to everyone.

‘Going to School’, ‘Going to Church’ etc.

In all the above sentences there is a singular countable noun: ‘supermarket’, ‘park’ etc. We use no article when we describe places where we go as part of our routine (work, home, school etc.)

Example 1.

a. *I went to a school in London.*

b. *I went to school in London.*

In sentence **a** the focus is on the place: the school itself. In sentence **b** the focus is on the activity. However, unlike in the previous examples, 'the' is not used.

Example 2.

a. *I went to a church today.*

b. *I went to church today.*

As in example 1, in sentence **a** the focus is on the place, maybe visiting it as a tourist, while in sentence **b** the focus is on the activity, as part of a routine.

Articles and Names

Generally no articles are used before names. For example, it would be wrong say '*I love the Paris*' as 'Paris' is the name of the city. However, certain names do include articles.

Example 1.

a. *X I live in UK.*

b. *✓ I live in the UK.*

Although this is the name of a country, it is necessary to use 'the'. This is because 'kingdom' is a singular countable noun.

Example 2.

a. *X My friend lives in USA.*

b. *✓ My friend lives in the USA.*

Although 'states' is plural we are talking about one specific group of states: the united states of America.

Example 3.

a. *✓ Robin Hood lived in Sherwood Forest.*

b. *✓ I live near Clapton Pond.*

Sherwood Forest is a forest in England where Robin Hood is supposed to have lived.
Clapton Pond is an area in London.

Example 4.

a. ✓ *I work on Kings Road.*

b. X *I work on The Kings Road.*

Articles and Official Titles

Example 1.

a. *Diana, Princess of Wales, died in 1997.*

b. *Diana, the Princess of Wales, died in 1997.*

Both these sentences are correct. Although 'princess' is a singular countable noun, we don't use an article in sentence **a** because 'Princess of Wales' is an official title. Grammatically speaking, in sentence **a** the subject is 'Diana, Princess of Wales'. In sentence **b** the subject is 'Diana', while 'the princess of Wales' is simply a description of who she was.

Example 2.

The same construction can be used to refer to other titles.

a. *Tony is manager of HR.*

b. *Tony is the manager of HR.*

Again both sentences are correct, and they convey essentially the same information. Sentence **a** tells us Tony's official job title: manager of HR. Sentence **b** simply tells us what Tony's job is.

Articles and 'Job Descriptions'

In sentences with the following sentence structure, which is common in newspapers, an article is not required.

Example 1.

a. *Richard Branson, entrepreneur, is known for his publicity stunts.*

b. *Richard Branson, the/an entrepreneur, is known for his publicity stunts.*

Both of these sentences are grammatically correct. In sentence **b** 'the' is more likely than 'an' because Richard Branson is famous for being an entrepreneur.

Example 2.

a. *Sarah, mother of two, was robbed at knifepoint.*

b. *Mother of two, Sarah, was robbed at knife point.*

Both word-orders are correct.

Example 3.

a. ✓ *Tony is manager of HR.*

b. X *Richard Branson is entrepreneur.*

c. ✓ *Richard Branson is **an** entrepreneur.*

'The Lion is King of the Jungle'

Groups of things can sometimes be referred to using 'the' + the singular noun OR no article + plural noun.

Example 1.

a. *The gorilla is my favourite animal.*

b. *Gorillas are my favourite animal.*

These two sentences are both grammatically correct, and mean the same thing. 'The gorilla' does not refer to one individual gorilla; it refers to the *concept* of a gorilla.

Example 2.

a. *Jungles are full of wildlife.*

b. *The jungle is full of wildlife.*

Here again both sentences are correct. 'The jungle' basically means 'typical jungles'. This construction is common when talking about animals and plants. Using 'The gorilla' and 'the jungle' conveys respect for gorillas and jungles; it makes them sound important.

Example 3.

a. ✓ *Asians usually have dark hair.*

b. X *The Asian usually has dark hair.*

You should never use this construction to talk about groups of people, as it can sound racist.

Remember!

A countable noun in singular will ALWAYS need an article (a/an/the) OR a determinative (this/that/my/your etc.)