

## 61 articles (1): introduction

### 1 What are articles?

Articles are small words that are often used at the beginning of noun phrases. There are two: *the* (the 'definite article') and *a/an* (the 'indefinite article'). They belong to a group of words called 'determiners' (see 154).

### 2 What are articles used for?

Articles can show whether we are talking about things that are known both to the speaker/writer and to the listener/reader ('definite'), or that are not known to them both ('indefinite').

### 3 How much do articles matter?

The correct use of the articles is one of the most difficult points in English grammar. Fortunately, most article mistakes do not matter too much. Even if we leave all the articles out of a sentence, it can usually be understood.

*Please can you lend me pound of butter till end of week?*

However, it is better to use the articles correctly if possible. Sections 62–70 give the most important rules and exceptions.

### 4 speakers of Western European languages

Most languages of Western European origin, and one or two others, have article systems quite like English. However, there are some differences in the way articles are used in English and these other languages. The most important differences are explained in Section 63. Students should read this first if they speak one of the following languages perfectly or very well: French, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Romanian.

### 5 speakers of other languages

If a student's language is one (e.g. Russian or Japanese) that is not listed in paragraph 4, he or she may have more difficulty with the correct use of articles. The most important rules are explained in Section 62, and students should read this first. There is more detailed information on difficult points in Sections 64–70.

pozn. actually, there are 5 types of articles

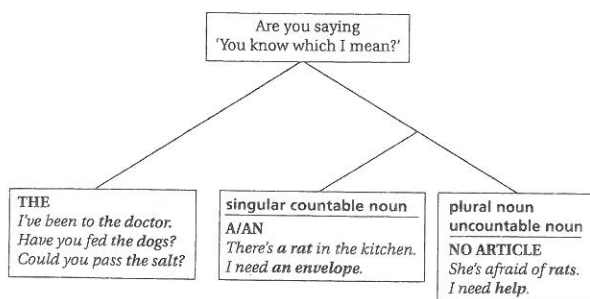
1. a
2. an
3. the [ðə]
4. the [ði:]
5. zero article

## 62 articles (2): basic information (A)

(This Section is for students who speak languages (e.g. Russian or Japanese) that do not have articles like English *a/an* and *the*. Students who speak languages which have articles (e.g. German or Portuguese) should read Section 63.)

### 1 two basic rules

- To say 'You know which I mean', we put *the* before a noun.  
*I've been to the doctor.* (You know which one: my doctor.)  
*Have you fed the dogs?* (You know which ones I mean.)  
*Could you pass the salt?* (You can see the salt that I want.)
- When we can't say 'You know which I mean', we:  
– put *a/an* before a singular countable noun (see 65).  
*There's a rat in the kitchen! I need an envelope.*  
– put no article with a plural or uncountable noun.  
*She's afraid of rats. I need help.*



### 2 four common mistakes to avoid

- Don't use *a/an* with plural or uncountable nouns.  
*John collects stamps.* (NOT ... *a stamps*.)  
*Our garden needs water.* (NOT ... *a water*.)
- Don't use *the* to talk about things in general. *The* does not mean 'all'. (For exceptions, see 68.2.)  
*Elephants can swim very well.* (NOT *The elephants can swim...*)  
*Petrol is expensive.* (NOT *The petrol...*)
- Don't use articles together with *my*, *this*, or other determiners.  
*my work* (NOT *the-my work*)  
*this problem* (NOT *the-this problem*)  
*a friend of mine* (NOT *a-my friend*)
- Don't use singular countable nouns alone, without an article or other determiner. We can say *a cat*, *the cat*, *my cat*, *this cat*, *any cat*, *either cat* or *every cat*, but not just *cat*. (For exceptions, see 70.)  
*Give it to the cat.* (NOT *Give it to cat*.)  
*Annie is a doctor.* (NOT *Annie is doctor*.)

For more detailed information about articles, see the following sections.

## 63 articles (3): basic information (B)

(This Section is for students who speak a language that has articles: e.g. French, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Spanish, Italian, Greek. If you speak a language without articles – for example Russian or Japanese – read Section 62.)

Articles are often used in similar ways in English and other languages, but there are some differences. The most important are as follows.

### 1 talking in general

In English, when we are talking about people or things in general, we do not usually use *the* with uncountable or plural nouns.

*Life is complicated.* (NOT *The life is complicated*.)

*My sister loves horses.* (NOT ... *the horses*.)

### 2 talking about jobs, types etc

In English, we normally put *a/an* with a singular noun that is used for classifying – saying what job somebody has, what class, group or type somebody or something belongs to, what we use something for, etc.

*She's a dentist.* (NOT *She's dentist*.)

*I'm looking forward to being a grandmother.*

*I used my shoe as a hammer.*

For more detailed information about articles, see the following Sections.

## 64 articles (4): more about the

### 1 the = 'you know which one(s)'

*The* usually means something like 'you know which I mean'. We use *the* before a noun (singular, plural or uncountable) when our listener/reader knows (or can easily see) which particular person(s), thing(s) etc we are talking about. Compare:

– *I'm going to the post office.* (The listener knows which: the usual one.)

*Is there a post office near here?* (Any post office.)

– *I didn't like the film.* (The one that the speaker and listener saw.)

*Let's go and see a film.* (The speaker doesn't say which one.)

– *She arrived on the 8.15 train.* (The speaker says which train.)

*She arrived in an old taxi.* (The speaker doesn't say which taxi.)

– *Did you wash the clothes?* (The listener knows which clothes.)

*I need to buy clothes.* (The listener does not know which clothes.)

– *What did you do with the coffee I bought?* (The speaker says which coffee.)

*I don't drink coffee.* (Any coffee.)

Our listener/reader may know which one(s) we mean because:

a we have mentioned it/them before

*She's got two children: a boy and a girl. The boy's fourteen and the girl's eight.*

*So what did you do then? ~ Gave the money straight back to the policeman.* (The listener has already heard about the money and the policeman.)

b we say which one(s) we mean

*Who are the girls over there with John?*

*Tell Pat the story about John and Susie. I'll try the green shirt.*

c it is clear from the situation which one(s) we mean

*Could you close the door?* (Only one door is open.)

*Ann's in the kitchen. Could you feed the dogs?*

*Did you enjoy the party? What's the time?*

### 2 the = 'the only one(s) around'

The listener may know which one we mean because there is no choice – there is only one (e.g. *the sun*, *the moon*, *the earth*, *the world*, *the universe*, *the future*) or there is only one in our part of the world (e.g. *the government*).

*I haven't seen the sun for days. Do you trust the government?*

*People used to think the earth was flat.*

### 3 superlatives

We usually use *the* with superlatives (see 141–146) because there is normally only one best, biggest etc individual or group (so it is clear which one(s) we are talking about). For the same reason, we usually use *the* with *first*, *next*, *last*, *same* and *only*.

*I'm the oldest in my family. Can I have the next pancake?*

*We went to the same school.*

### 4 the meaning 'the well-known'

After a name, an identifying expression with *the* is often used to make it clear that the person referred to is 'the well-known one'.

*She married Richard Burton, the actor.*

*I'd like you to meet Cathy Parker, the novelist.*

### 5 possessives and demonstratives

We do not use *the* with possessives or demonstratives.

*This is my uncle.* (NOT ... *the-my uncle*.)

*Is that Mary's car?* (NOT ... *the-Mary's car?*)

*I like this beer.* (NOT ... *the-this-beer*.)

### 6 proper nouns (names)

We do not usually use *the* with singular proper nouns (there are some exceptions – see 70.17–18).

*Mary lives in Switzerland.* (NOT *The Mary lives in the Switzerland*.)

But note the use of *the* (pronounced /ði:/) with a person's name to mean 'the well-known'.

*My name's James Bond. ~ What, not the James Bond?*

### 7 things in general

We usually use no article, not *the*, to talk about things in general – *the* does not mean 'all'. (For details and exceptions, see 68.)

*Books are expensive.* (NOT *The books are expensive*.)

*Life is hard.* (NOT *The life is hard*.)

### 8 pronunciation

*The* is normally pronounced /ði:/ before a vowel and /ðə/ before a consonant. Compare:

*the ice* /ði: aɪs/      *the snow* /ðə snəʊ/

The choice between /ði:/ and /ðə/ depends on pronunciation, not spelling. We pronounce /ði:/ before a vowel sound, even if it is written as a consonant.

*the hour* /ði: 'aʊə(r)/      *the MP* /ði: em 'pi:/

And we pronounce /ðə/ before a consonant sound, even if it is written as a vowel.

*the university* /ðə ju:ni'vɜ:səti/

*the one-pound coin* /ðə 'wʌn 'paʊnd 'kɔɪn/

We sometimes pronounce a stressed /ði:/ before a hesitation, or when we want to stress the following word, even if it begins with a consonant.

*He's the /ði:/ – just a moment – deputy assistant vice-president.*

*I've found the /ði:/ present for Angela!*