

68 articles (8): talking in general

1 the does not mean 'all'

We do not use *the* with uncountable or plural nouns to talk about things in general – to talk about all books, all people or all life, for example. *The* does not mean 'all'. Instead, we use *no* article. Compare:

- Move *the books off that chair and sit down.* (= particular books)
Books are expensive. (NOT *The books are expensive.*)
- I'm studying *the life of Beethoven.* (= one particular life)
Life is complicated. (NOT *The life...*)
- Where's *the cheese?* ~ I ate it. – Why has *the light* gone out?
I love *cheese.* Nothing can travel faster than *light.*
- I've joined *the local Dramatic Society.*
It's not always easy to fit in with *society.*
- I never really understood *the nature of my father's work.*
She's very interested in *nature, especially animals and birds.*
- Write your name in *the space at the bottom of the page.*
Would you like to travel into *space?*

Note that *most* (meaning 'the majority of') is used without *the*.
Most birds can fly. (NOT *The most...*)
Most of the children got very tired. (NOT *The most...*)

2 generalisations with singular countable nouns

Sometimes we talk about things in general by using *the* with a singular countable noun.
Schools should concentrate more on the child and less on exams.
This is common with the names of scientific instruments and inventions, and musical instruments.

- Life would be quieter without the telephone.*
- The violin is more difficult than the piano.*

We can also generalise by talking about one example of a class, using *a/an* (meaning 'any') with a singular countable noun.

- A baby deer can stand as soon as it's born.*
- A child needs plenty of love.*

Note that we cannot use *a/an* in this way when we are generalising about all of the members of a group together.

- The tiger is in danger of becoming extinct.* (NOT *A tiger is in danger of becoming extinct.* The sentence is about the whole tiger family, not about individuals.)
- Do you like horses?* (NOT *Do you like a horse?*)

69 articles (9): the (difficult cases)

It is sometimes difficult to know whether or not to use *the*. For example, we use *no* article to generalise with uncountable and plural words (see 68); but we use *the* to show that the listener/reader knows which people or things we are talking about (see 64). Sometimes both these meanings come together, and it is difficult to know which form is correct. The grammatical distinctions in this area are not very clear; often the same idea can be expressed both with *the* and with *no* article. The following notes may help.

1 groups: *nurses or the nurses; railways or the railways?*

When we generalise about members of a group, we usually use *no* article. But if we talk about the group as a whole – as if it was a well-known unit – we are more likely to use *the*. Compare:

- *Nurses mostly work very hard.* – *Stars vary greatly in size.*
The nurses have never gone on strike. *The stars are really bright tonight.*
- *Farmers often vote Conservative.*
What has this government done for the farmers?
- *It's difficult for railways to make a profit.* (any railways)
The railways are getting more and more unreliable. (our well-known railways)

This often happens when we talk about nationalities. Compare:
New Zealanders don't like to be mistaken for Australians.
The Australians suffered heavy losses in the First World War.

2 French painters; the Impressionists

We are more likely to use *the* if we are talking about a 'closed' group or class with a relatively definite, limited number of members. Compare:

- *French painters* (a large, indefinite group)
- *the Impressionists* (a particular artistic movement; we know more or less who belonged to the group)
- *19th-century poets*
- *the Romantic poets* (Shelly, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth and a few others)
- *British comprehensive schools*
- *the British 'Public Schools'* (a limited group of expensive high-prestige schools)

Specialists are likely to use *the* for groups or classes that they study or know about. Compare:

- Metals are mostly shiny.*
- Next term we're going to study the metals in detail.*

3 1960s music; the music of the 1960s

Some expressions are 'half-general' – in the middle between general and particular. If we talk about *1960s music, eighteenth-century history* or *poverty in Britain*, we are not talking about all music, history or poverty, but these are still rather general ideas (compared with *the music we heard last night, the history I did at school* or *the poverty I grew up in*). In these 'half-general' expressions, we usually use *no* article. However, *the* is often used when the noun is followed by a limiting, defining phrase, especially one with *of*. Compare:

- *1960s music* – *African butterflies*
the music of the 1960s *the butterflies of Africa*

4 physical environment: *the town, the sea*

The is used with a number of rather general expressions referring to our physical environment – the world around us and its climate. *The* suggests that everybody is familiar with what we are talking about. Examples are:
the town, the country, the mountains, the sea, the seaside, the wind, the rain, the weather, the sunshine, the night.

- My wife likes the seaside, but I prefer the mountains.*
- British people talk about the weather a lot.*
- I love listening to the wind.*

But note that *no* article is used with *nature, society* or *space* when these have a 'general' meaning (see 68).

5 on the bus; at the hairdresser

We use *the* (with a singular countable noun) when we talk about some kinds of thing that are part of everybody's lives, like 'the bus' or 'the hairdresser'. In this case *the bus*, for example, does not mean 'one bus that you know about'; we use *the* to suggest that taking a bus is a common experience that we all share.

- I have some of my best ideas when I'm on the bus.*
- Most of my friends go to the hairdresser two or three times a month.*
- Do you sing in the bath?*
- I've stopped reading the newspaper because it's too depressing.*

For similar expressions with *no* article (e.g. *in bed, in hospital*), see 70.1.

6 She kicked him on the knee; He sat at the side

We sometimes use *the* even when it is not exactly clear which of several particular persons or things we are talking about. This can happen when there are several similar possibilities, and it is unnecessary to be more definite.

- Lying by the side of the road we saw the wheel of a car.*

(NOT ... *a wheel of a car.*)

- John Perkins is the son of a rich banker.* (who may have more than one son)
- She kicked him on the knee.*

The is often used like this with *side* and *wrong*.

- I usually sit at the side in church.* *He's the wrong man for me.*
- (on the phone) *I'm sorry. You've got a/the wrong number.*

70 articles (10): special rules and exceptions

1 common expressions without articles

In some common fixed expressions to do with place, time and movement, normally countable nouns are treated as uncountables, without articles. Examples are:

- to/at/in/from school/university/college*
- to/at/in/out of hospital (BrE)* *to/in/out of bed/prison*
- to/at sea* *to/in/from town* *to/at/from work*
- at/from home* *leave home*
- leave/start/enter school/university/college*
- by day* *at night*
- by car/bus/bicycle/plane/train/tube/boat* *on foot*
- by radio/phone/letter/mail*

see next page

With place nouns, expressions with or without articles may have different meanings. Compare:

- *I met her at college.* (when we were students)
- *I'll meet you at the college.* (The college is just a meeting place.)
- *Jane's in hospital.* (as a patient)
- *I left my coat in the hospital when I was visiting Jane.*
- *Who smokes in class?* (= ... in the classroom?)
- *Who in the class smokes?* (= Who is a smoker ...?)

In American English, *university* and *hospital* are not used without articles.

- She was unhappy at the university.*
- Say that again and I'll put you in the hospital.*

2 double expressions

Articles are often dropped in double expressions, particularly with prepositions.

- with knife and fork* *on land and sea* *day after day*
- with hat and coat* *arm in arm* *husband and wife*
- from top to bottom* *inch by inch*

For cases like *the bread and (the) butter*, see 17B.

3 possessive 's

Nouns lose their articles after possessive 's.

- the coat that belongs to John* = *John's coat* (NOT *John's the coat* OR *the John's coat*)
- the economic problems of America* = *America's economic problems* (NOT *the America's economic problems*)

But the possessive noun itself may have an article.

- the wife of the boss* = *the boss's wife*

4 noun modifiers

When a noun modifies another noun, the first noun's article is dropped.

- lessons in how to play the guitar* = *guitar lessons* (NOT *the guitar-lessons*)
- a spot on the sun* = *a sunspot*

5 both and all

We often leave out *the* after *both*.

- Both (the) children are good at maths.*

And we often leave out *the* between *all* and a number.

- All (the) three brothers were arrested.*

We usually leave out *the* after *all* in *all day, all night, all week, all year, all winter* and *all summer*.

- He's been away all week.* *I haven't seen her all day.*

6 kind of etc

We usually leave out *a/an* after *kind of, sort of, type of* and similar expressions (see 55.1).

- What kind of (a) person is she?*
- Have you got a cheaper sort of radio?*
- They've developed a new variety of sheep.*

7 amount and number

The is dropped after *the amount/number of*.

- I was surprised at the amount of money collected.* (NOT ... *of the money*)
- The number of unemployed is rising steadily.*

8 man and woman

Unlike other singular countable nouns, *man* and *woman* can be used in a general sense without articles.

- Man and woman were created equal.*

But we more often use *a woman* and *a man*, or *men* and *women*.

- A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.* (old feminist joke)
- Men and women have similar abilities and needs.*

Man is also commonly used to mean 'the human race', though many people regard this usage as sexist and prefer to avoid it (see 222.6).

- How did Man first discover fire?*

see more details in "Charts"

He's in prison for robbery.
He wants to visit his brother.
He goes to church every Sunday.
(to do relig. services)
They went to the church to repair the roof.