

Indefinite and Definite Articles

Articles are small words that are often used before nouns or noun phrases. There are two articles: **a/an** (the “indefinite article”) and **the** (the “definite article”). Like adjectives, they belong to a group of words called “determiners,” which give additional information about nouns.

One of the biggest challenges for non-native speakers of English is learning when to use indefinite or definite articles.

These are the general rules:

To talk about something that is **not specific or not known by both the speaker and the listener/reader**, use the **indefinite article**.

I need to buy **a new wide-angle lens** for my camera. (any lens)

She used **an elegant fabric** to line her coat. (an unspecified fabric)

To talk about something that is **specific or known by both the speaker and the listener/reader**, use the **definite article**.

Did you understand **the art history lecture**? (this specific lecture)

Use of a or an

The use of **a** or **an** depends not on how the word that follows is spelled, but on how it is pronounced.

Use **a** before a **consonant sound**.

a Ghanaian mask **a** new brush **a** one-day art show **a** European director

Use **an** before a vowel sound.

an interesting film **an** undiscovered painting **an** hour-long class **an** FBI agent

Jobs/Types/Generalities

In English, **a/an** is normally used 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 something is used for; etc.

He’s **a curator** at the RISD museum. [~~He’s curator...~~]

The painter used an old bed sheet **as a canvas**. [~~...as canvas.~~]

To talk about people or things in general, **the** is not usually used with uncountable or plural nouns.

Lee’s studying **interior architecture**. [**NOT:** ...~~the interior architecture~~]

The Cable Car Cinema often shows **foreign films**. [**NOT:** ...~~the foreign film~~]

Place Names

In place names, use **the** in these categories:

seas: **the** Mediterranean

rivers: **the** Imjin

most hotels: **the** Ritz

oceans: **the** Pacific

mountains: **the** Andes

most theaters: **the** Avon

island groups: **the** Maldives

deserts: **the** Mojave

most museums: **the** Frick

Physical Environment and Time

Use **the** with parts of the natural world or a specific environment, with weather, and with moments in time. **The** in these cases suggests that everyone is familiar with what is being talked about.

the sun	the future	the ocean	the mountains
the wind	the past	the fog	the forest
the rain	the present	the cold	the snow

The can be used with any season (*winter, spring, summer, autumn*), but it is only mandatory with **the fall**.

Note that **the** is not used with abstract nouns such as **nature, society, or space** when they have a general meaning (see Singular and Plural handout on count and non-count nouns).

Plein-air painting is done on location, surrounded by **nature**.

Egon Schiele's portraits reflect his rejection of bourgeois Austrian **society**.

Superlatives

Use **the** with superlative adjectives, and with adjectives such as **first, next, last, same, and only**:

the newest member of the Graphic Design department

the last paper I wrote for Art History 101

Famous or Well-Known People

Use **the** with people, or groups of people, who are famous or known by most listeners/readers:

Dale Chihuly, **the glass sculptor**

the pioneering photographer Dorothea Lange

Art therapy can open new lives of creativity for **the differently-abled**.

Muralist painter Diego Rivera often depicted **the Mexicans'** struggles against their oppressors.

The Only One (or Ones) of a Kind

Use **the** in expressions with **the ... of ...** to mean there is only one (or one group) of its kind.

the Museum of Fine Arts **the** Quilts of Gee's Bend