

Definite, indefinite and zero articles

Introduction



Mary is **a** scientist. She studied **Ø** biology at **the** University of Manchester.

Definition

We use articles before nouns to help define them.

Indefinite article: **a** or **an**

I have **a** banana and **an** orange.

Definite article: **the**

The meal we had last night was delicious.

Zero article: Neither **a/an** nor **the**

People often drink **Ø** coffee after **Ø** dinner.

Note that

Sometimes an article is not necessary but we always need one with a singular countable noun.

Singular
countable nouns

Plural countable
nouns

Uncountable
nouns

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| a - for nouns that begin with a consonant | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |
| an - for nouns that begin with a vowel | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |
| the | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| zero article | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |

Indefinite article

a is used:

- before consonants: **a** doctor, **a** mechanic, **a** dog, **a** big car, **a** happy person
- before vowels that sound like the consonant /j/: **a** university, **a** European person

an is used:

- before vowels: **an** architect, **an** umbrella, **an** easy exercise, **an** important meeting
- before 'h' when it is silent: **an** hour, **an** honourable person
- before consonants that sound like vowels: **an** FBI agent, **an** SNCF employee

| Rules for 'a/an' | Examples |
|----------------------------------|--|
| To define something | Tennis is a sport. Manchester is a city in England. |
| To describe someone or something | She's a lovely person. He's an optimist. It's a lovely day today. |
| To talk about jobs | He's a lawyer and his wife is an electrician. |

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| When we mention something or someone for the first time | I have a dog and a cat. There's an angry man in reception! She has a new car. |
| When we mean one of many - it doesn't matter or we don't know which one | Can you open a window, please? She works in an office. |

Definite article

the is used before singular and plural countable nouns and before uncountable nouns.

| Rules for 'the' | Examples |
|--|--|
| When we talk about something specific - we know which one(s) | What is the name of your company? Here are the parts that you ordered. The children are on holiday this week. |
| When we talk about something previously mentioned | We have a cat and a dog. The cat is very old but the dog loves playing with the children. |
| When there is only one | Paris is the capital city of France. the sun the Queen of England |
| Countries which are plural or which include the kind of country in the name - kingdom, republic etc. | the UK the United States the Netherlands the Republic of Ireland |
| Plural names of places | the Alps the Maldives the Midlands |
| Regions and points on the globe | the Far East the Mid-West [U.S.] the North the North Pole Manchester is in the north-west of England. |

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| Geographical features: oceans, seas, rivers, forests, gulfs, peninsulas and deserts (but not lakes) | the Pacific the Irish Sea the Rhone the Sahara the Black Forest the Gulf of Mexico |
| When talking generally about the population of some countries | The Spanish start work later and finish later than other Europeans. The Japanese are often quiet during meetings. |
| As an alternative to the plural when discussing facts relating to animals or objects generally And, similarly, when talking about musical instruments | The elephant is found in Africa and Asia. [Elephants are...] The CD was invented in 1965. [CDs were...] Do you play the piano? I love listening to the violin. |
| Buildings | the National Gallery the Louvre the Ritz Hotel |
| Some organisations and institutions | the police the Army, the Navy, the Royal Air Force the BBC the Internet |
| Some expressions relating to position or time | on the top in the middle at the bottom on the left/right at the moment in the end at the beginning at the weekend in the morning/afternoon/evening |
| With 'same' | It's the same as this one. |

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| With some adjectives to refer to a group of people | the poor = poor people generally the rich the young the homeless |
| Before superlative adjectives and adverbs | the biggest the most beautiful the least expensive the best/worst the most carefully |
| Before some adjectives, often in promotional literature | the necessary = what is necessary Have a look at these recommendations and do the necessary. |
| Before some adjectives to make a noun [only in literary or poetic language or in certain expressions] | the deep = the sea the blue = the sky It was like a bolt from the blue = It came as a complete surprise to me. |

Zero article

We don't always need to use **a/an** or **the** before a noun. We sometimes call this zero article or you may see it as **Ø**.

| Rules for zero article | Examples | Exceptions |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| All continents and most countries | Ø Japan is in Ø Asia and has more than 6,000 islands. The north coast of Ø France faces the south coast of Ø England. | Names of countries which include republic, kingdom etc. or plurals: the Czech Republic the UK the Philippines the Netherlands |

| | | |
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| Islands | Ø Ibiza, Ø Corsica and Ø Sicily are all islands in the Mediterranean. | Names which include the word isle(s) or plurals: the Channel Islands the Isle of Wight the Scilly Isles |
| Cities and towns | Ø Birmingham is the second largest city in England. | the Hague |
| Mountains & lakes | Ø Lake Gwynant is 3km from Ø Mount Snowdon in North Wales. | When we don't include 'Mount': the Matterhorn the Jungfrau Groups of lakes: the Great Lakes |
| Names of streets | Ø Oxford Street in London has 548 shops. | the High Street [Street signs usually show High Street but we always say the High Street.] |
| Names of shops | Ø Sainsbury's is England's oldest supermarket and Ø Tesco is the biggest. | A particular shop: The Sainsbury's in the High Street is open on Sundays. |
| Languages | Swiss people speak Ø German, Ø French, Ø Italian or Ø Romansh. | Sometimes, instead of 'English', (or any other language) we say: The English language is spoken as a native or foreign language by about 900 million people. The meaning is the same but this is more formal. |

Places such as school, prison, hospital, church etc. when we think of them generally, not as specific buildings

Christians go to **Ø** church on Sundays.

My son's going to **Ø** university in September and my daughter left **Ø** college last year - she's at **Ø** work now.

He takes his children to **Ø** school every morning.

She's in **Ø** hospital. [staying as a patient for more than a day]

We took him to **Ø** hospital when he broke his leg.

He's in **Ø** prison. He went to **Ø** prison 5 years ago for murder.

'**The** church' means the Christian Church as an institution, not a place.

the synagogue, **the** temple, **the** mosque, etc.

Compare:

She works in **a** hospital. [It doesn't matter which one.]

I went to **the** hospital yesterday. [as a visitor - and we know which one.]

Names of stations, airports etc.

You can get a train to **Ø** Gatwick Airport from **Ø** Victoria Station.

Sport and education

I like playing **Ø** golf at the weekend.

She's studying **Ø** archaeology at Manchester University.

Generalisations - uncountable and plural countable nouns only

I love **Ø** coffee but I don't like **Ø** tea.

He reads **Ø** magazines about **Ø** cars and **Ø** motorbikes.

Ø Happiness is more important than **Ø** money.

Compare:

I need **a** coffee but **the** coffee at work is horrible!

She loves **Ø** music but she doesn't like **the** music her son listens to.

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Meals | In Spain, they have \emptyset lunch and \emptyset dinner much later than in England. | Compare: We had a nice lunch yesterday. The lunch at the convention was terrible! |
| Other expressions | I go to \emptyset bed at 11.00 & on Sundays I stay in \emptyset bed until 10.00. I go to work by \emptyset bus or \emptyset train but never on \emptyset foot. It's on \emptyset page 36. They're on \emptyset holiday. | Compare: The dog's in the bed again! [talking about a specific bed] |
| Before 'next' and 'last' | I went to Japan \emptyset last year. [last = previous] I'll see her at the meeting \emptyset next month. | Louis Philippe was the last king of France. [last = final] The last time I went to London, it rained every day! [last = the most recent] I was there first and Jean was the next (person) to arrive. |

Examples



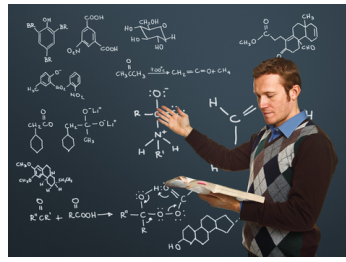
Can you open **a** window, please?



Can you close **the** window, please?



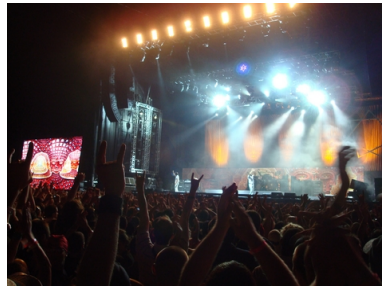
My daughter's at **∅** university,
[she's a student] but she's on
∅ holiday at **the** moment with **a** friend.



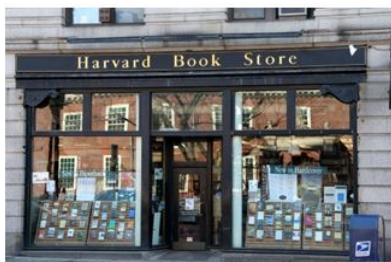
My husband works as **a** lecturer at **the**
university. [We know which one]



I love listening to **∅** music...
music is too loud.



...but I don't like going to **∅** concerts; the



I need to buy **a** book.



The book I am looking for is by J. Wright.



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