

# 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

<b>a</b> - for nouns that begin with a consonant	✓	✗	✗
<b>an</b> - for nouns that begin with a vowel	✓	✗	✗
<b>the</b>	✓	✓	✓
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 <b>a</b> sport. Manchester is <b>a</b> city in England.
To describe someone or something	She's <b>a</b> lovely person. He's <b>an</b> optimist. It's <b>a</b> lovely day today.
To talk about jobs	He's <b>a</b> lawyer and his wife is <b>an</b> electrician.

When we mention something or someone for the first time	I have <b>a</b> dog and <b>a</b> cat. There's <b>an</b> angry man in reception! She has <b>a</b> new car.
When we mean one of many - it doesn't matter or we don't know which one	Can you open <b>a</b> window, please? She works in <b>an</b> 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 <b>the</b> name of your company? Here are <b>the</b> parts that you ordered. <b>The</b> children are on holiday this week.
When we talk about something previously mentioned	We have a cat and a dog. <b>The</b> cat is very old but <b>the</b> dog loves playing with <b>the</b> children.
When there is only one	Paris is <b>the</b> capital city of France. <b>the</b> sun <b>the</b> Queen of England
Countries which are plural or which include the kind of country in the name - kingdom, republic etc.	<b>the</b> UK <b>the</b> United States <b>the</b> Netherlands <b>the</b> Republic of Ireland
Plural names of places	<b>the</b> Alps <b>the</b> Maldives <b>the</b> Midlands
Regions and points on the globe	<b>the</b> Far East <b>the</b> Mid-West [U.S.] <b>the</b> North <b>the</b> North Pole Manchester is in <b>the</b> north-west of England.

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

With some adjectives to refer to a group of people	<b>the</b> poor = poor people generally <b>the</b> rich <b>the</b> young <b>the</b> homeless
Before superlative adjectives and adverbs	<b>the</b> biggest <b>the</b> most beautiful <b>the</b> least expensive <b>the</b> best/worst <b>the</b> most carefully
Before some adjectives, often in promotional literature	<b>the</b> necessary = what is necessary  Have a look at these recommendations and do <b>the</b> necessary.
Before some adjectives to make a noun [only in literary or poetic language or in certain expressions]	<b>the</b> deep = <b>the</b> sea <b>the</b> blue = <b>the</b> sky It was like a bolt from <b>the</b> 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	<b>Ø</b> Japan is in <b>Ø</b> Asia and has more than 6,000 islands.  The north coast of <b>Ø</b> France faces the south coast of <b>Ø</b> England.	Names of countries which include republic, kingdom etc. or plurals:  <b>the</b> Czech Republic <b>the</b> UK <b>the</b> Philippines <b>the</b> Netherlands

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

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.

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

## Examples



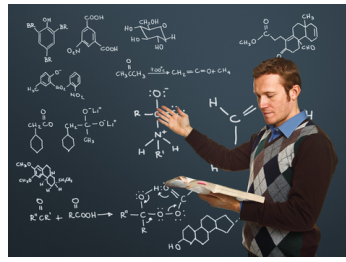
Can you open **a** window, please?



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.



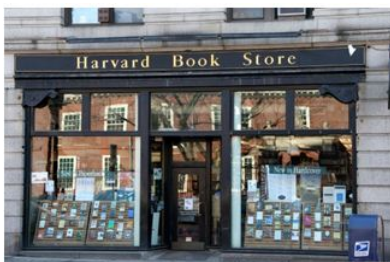
My husband works as **a** lecturer at **the**  
university. [We know which one]



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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