

# 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
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<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 **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 <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.

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

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

<p>Places such as school, prison, hospital, church etc. when we think of them generally, not as specific buildings</p>	<p>Christians go to <b>Ø</b> church on Sundays.</p> <p>My son's going to <b>Ø</b> university in September and my daughter left <b>Ø</b> college last year - she's at <b>Ø</b> work now.</p> <p>He takes his children to <b>Ø</b> school every morning.</p> <p>She's in <b>Ø</b> hospital. [staying as a patient for more than a day]</p> <p>We took him to <b>Ø</b> hospital when he broke his leg.</p> <p>He's in <b>Ø</b> prison. He went to <b>Ø</b> prison 5 years ago for murder.</p>	<p>'<b>The</b> church' means the Christian Church as an institution, not a place.</p> <p><b>the</b> synagogue, <b>the</b> temple, <b>the</b> mosque, etc.</p> <p>Compare:</p> <p>She works in <b>a</b> hospital. [It doesn't matter which one.]</p> <p>I went to <b>the</b> hospital yesterday. [as a visitor - and we know which one.]</p>
<p>Names of stations, airports etc.</p>	<p>You can get a train to <b>Ø</b> Gatwick Airport from <b>Ø</b> Victoria Station.</p>	
<p>Sport and education</p>	<p>I like playing <b>Ø</b> golf at the weekend.</p> <p>She's studying <b>Ø</b> archaeology at Manchester University.</p>	
<p>Generalisations - uncountable and plural countable nouns only</p>	<p>I love <b>Ø</b> coffee but I don't like <b>Ø</b> tea.</p> <p>He reads <b>Ø</b> magazines about <b>Ø</b> cars and <b>Ø</b> motorbikes.</p> <p><b>Ø</b> Happiness is more important than <b>Ø</b> money.</p>	<p>Compare:</p> <p>I need <b>a</b> coffee but <b>the</b> coffee at work is horrible!</p> <p>She loves <b>Ø</b> music but she doesn't like <b>the</b> music her son listens to.</p>

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

## Examples



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

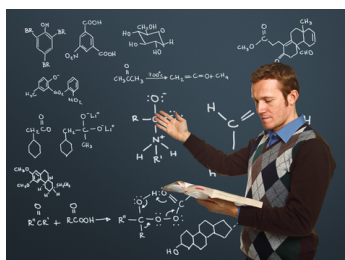


Can you close **the** window, please?





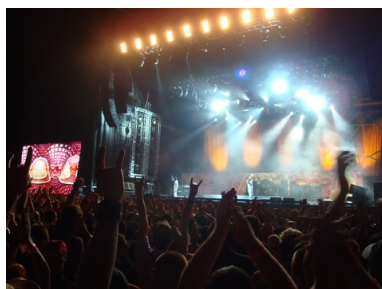
My daughter's at **Ø** university,  
[she's a student] but she's on  
**Ø** holiday at **the** moment with **a** friend.



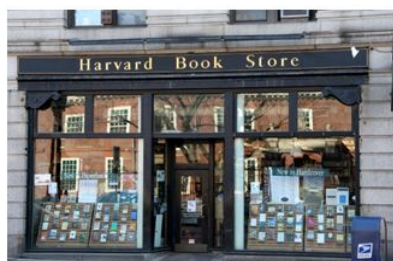
My husband works as **a** lecturer at **the**  
university. [We know which one]



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



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



I need to buy **a** book.



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

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