

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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

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



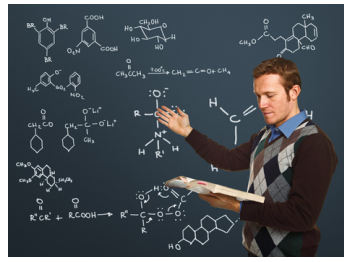
Can you open **a** window, please?



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.



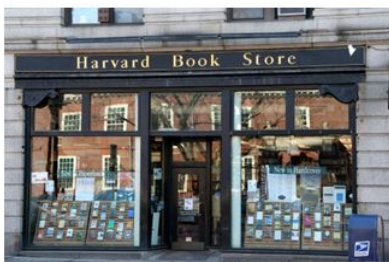
My husband works as **a** lecturer at **the**
university. [We know which one]



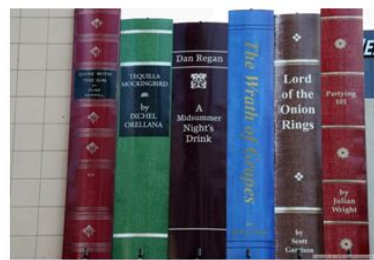
I love listening to **∅** music...
music is too loud.



...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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Last update: **2023/02/14 14:21**

