



## Indefinite and Definite Articles

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Articles are small words that are often used before nouns or noun phrases. There are two: *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. [NOT: ~~He's curator~~...]*  
*The painter used an old bed sheet as **a canvas**. [NOT ...~~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 films~~]*

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## 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 planets*              *the ocean*              *the mountains*              *the forest*  
*the wind*                      *the cold*                      *the fog*                      *the rain*                      *the snow*  
*the past*                      *the present*              *the future*

- *The* can be used with seasons (*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.*

## Place Names

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

seas: *the Mediterranean*                      oceans: *the Pacific*                      mountains: *the Andes*  
island groups: *the Maldives*                      rivers: *the Imjin*                      deserts: *the Mojave*  
most hotels: *the Ritz*                      most theaters: *the Avon*                      most museums: *the Frick*

## 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*  
*Muralist painter Diego Rivera often depicted the Mexicans' struggles against their oppressors.*  
*Art therapy can open new lives of creativity for the differently-abled.*

## 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*