Using English Articles

For better or for worse, English is blessed with the article. The good news is that English has just two forms of the indefinite article (*a* & *an*) and one form of the definite article (*the*). The article in English is a precision tool (a "determiner" or "noun marker") that greatly contributes to the accuracy of expression in the language. Most article usage is in fact reasonably logical. The following explanation highlights the basic grammar logic (left column) followed by examples (right column).

a, an   The Indefinite Article

To help pronunciation, *a* is used in front of any word that begins with a <u>consonant</u> or consonant-like vowel sound. Conversely, *an* is put in front of any word that begins with a pure vowel sound or a mute *'h'*.	• Our town has **a** theatre, **a** university, **a** large park and **a** conference hall. • Many Chinese still believe **an** Englishman always carries **an** umbrella. • It's **an** old custom. It's **a** strange old custom.
The indefinite article *a/an* is placed in front of a <u>countable noun</u> that is being mentioned for the very first time. Once introduced, all further references to it can be preceded by the definite article *the*.	• I have two cars: **a** Ford and **an** Audi. **The** Ford is white and **the** Audi is silver.
Note that <u>sound</u>, not spelling, is the most reliable indicator of when to use *a* or *an*!	• The coastguard received **an** SOS. (sounds like "ess") • He spent **an** hour standing in line. (sounds like "our")
If a noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between *a* and *an* depends on the initial <u>sound</u> of the adjective.	• She bought **a** broken egg. • They have **an** unusual problem. • It's **a** European country (sounds like "yer-o-pian")
In English, an indefinite article is needed in front of professions.	• She is **an** architect and he is **a** doctor.
The indefinite article can also be used instead of *per* when giving the rate or pace of something.	• He earns $200 **a** day. • She swims twice **a** week. • He drove at 60 miles **an** hour.
Note too that *little* and *few* become a whole lot more positive when preceded by the indefinite article!	• She has **a** little money and **a** few friends, so she'll probably get by. *Compare*: • She has little money and few friends, so I doubt if she'll get by.

the   The Definite Article

The definite article *the* is used in front of any noun the listener or reader already knows about.	• I have two cars: a Ford and an Audi. **The** Ford is white and **the** Audi is silver.
The is also used when the existence of something is common knowledge or comes as no surprise because of the context in which it is mentioned.	• Last week a fighter plane crashed into a field but **the** pilot managed to eject safely. • Yesterday I spent **the** afternoon at home. I put my clothes into **the** washing machine and went outside to sit in **the** garden.
The definite article is used in front of things generally regarded as *unique*.	• **The** sun, **the** moon, **the** sea, **the** sky, **the** Arctic Circle, **the** environment, **the** capital, **the** air, **the** ground, **the** country, etc.
Because nouns preceded by <u>superlative adjectives</u> and <u>ordinal numbers</u> are by their very nature *unique*, they too require the definite article. <u>Irregularity</u>: Spoken American English drops *the* in dates.	• It was **the** worst day of my life! • The captain was **the** first person to leave the burning tanker. • AmE June twenty-first. • BrE June **the** twenty-first. **The** twenty-first (day) of June.
The definite article is used in front of countable nouns representing a whole class or category of something.	• **The** computer has changed our lives. • It is left up to **the** consumer to decide which one to buy. • We all have a responsibility to look after **the** old and infirm. • **The** whale is the largest mammal.
The is used in front of oceans, seas, rivers, island and mountain chains, deserts, countries with plural names, and noun forms of points of the compass.	• **The** Pacific, **the** Mediterranean, **the** Amazon, **the** West Indies, **the** Hawaiian Islands, **the** Rockies, **the** Sahara, **the** Netherlands, **the** Far East, etc.
The is used in place names and titles including *of*. In the case of official job titles, **the** is usually dropped if there is only one such incumbent at any given time.	• It is unlikely **the** Queen of Denmark has ever swum in **the** Bay of Bengal. • Margret the II is (the) Queen of Denmark. • Donald was elected chairman of the board.
The is also used in proper names consisting of noun(s) and/or adjective(s) + noun.	• **The** Empire State Building, **the** English Channel, **the** White House, **the** Festival Hall, **the** Rolling Stones, **the** Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, **the** British Museum, etc.
The is used in hotel names. But usually not with motel names!	• **The** Hilton Hotel, **the** Savoy, **the** Sheraton. • Motel 6, Super 8, Days Inn, Sands Motel.

The is used for newspapers.	• **The** Times, **the** Baltimore Sun, **the** Daily Mail
The is used for many larger organizations and institutions (not <u>commercial enterprises</u>), including those with initials that are normally spelled out. Acronyms (initials read as whole words) are treated in the same way as regular names (<u>proper nouns</u>) and so do not require any article. If you are uncertain, please monitor usage in the media or consult a dictionary.	• **The** Commonwealth, **the** Fed, **the** EU, **the** WHO, **the** BBC, **the** FDA, **the** IAEA, etc. *Compare:* • OPEC, NATO, USC, UCLA, etc.
The is used for currencies.	• **The** U.S. dollar has risen against **the** Yen but fallen against **the** Euro.
In front of people's names, however, ***the*** is only used to avoid confusion.	• I'm **the** Davy Jones who lives in Taiwan.
The is used with the names of musical instruments.	• Elton John plays **the** piano.
The can be used instead of a possessive form when referring to parts of the body and items of clothing.	• She was hit on **the** head by a snowball (=a snowball hit *her* head). • Joe grabbed the youth by **the** collar (=Joe grabbed *the youth's* collar).
Many forms of entertainment are preceded by the definite article ***the***, but not the medium of television.	• I go to **the** cinema/movies, **the** theatre, **the** circus, **the** ballet and **the** opera. • In the daytime I listen to **the** radio, but in the evenings I like to watch television.

⸺   The Zero Article

No article is needed before abstract nouns used in a general sense.	• Love is all you need. • Crime is a growing problem in the inner cities.
No article is needed for names of languages and nationalities.	• Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian.
No article is needed for academic subjects.	• Mathematics, biology, history, English literature.
No article is need for the names of games and sports.	• Baseball, volleyball, hockey, cycling. • Anna Kournikova plays tennis to keep in shape.
No article is needed for most places consisting of just the name of a person, or the name of a person/place followed by a noun.	• Harrods, Macys, McDonald's, Lloyds Bank, St. Paul's Cathedral, Buckingham Palace, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, Harvard University, etc.
No article is usually needed in front of company names.	• Cisco Systems, Microsoft, CBS, EMI, Hitachi, Lufthansa, etc.
An article is <u>unnecessary</u> in official job titles, if there is only one person holding this position at any given time.	• Rick Perry is (the) Governor of Texas. *Compare:* • Rick Perry is **a** governor.
No article is needed before the names of meals, unless it is a formal occasion.	• Roger had breakfast in his hotel room. *Compare:* • I attended **a** dinner at the Rotary Club.
No article is needed before *bed*, *church*, *court*, *hospital*, *prison*, *school*, *college*, *university*, etc. when these are used for their primary purpose. If, however, they are used for any other purposes, ***the*** is required.	• She stayed **in bed** on Sunday instead of going **to church**. • The dissatisfied customer threatened to take him **to court**. • The dissident was released **from prison**. • After graduating from high school he went **to university**. *Compare:* • She sat on **the** bed while she changed her socks. • He entered **the** church to take photographs. • The decorators forgot a ladder in **the** prison, and the place was empty when they came back for it.

Articles are not needed in more abstract expressions of situation like *to/at sea*, t*o/at/out of work*, *in/out of town*, *in/out of office*, etc.	• My uncle first went *to sea* at the age of 15. He used to spend months *at sea*. • I go *to work* every day. I was *at work* yesterday. • Jack's been *out of work* for almost a year. • What's on *in town* (=my local town) this weekend? • Julie's *out of town* (=the town she lives in) until Thursday. • This government has been *in office* for about a year now. The opposition parties would dearly love to vote them *out of office*.
If, however, you start talking about somewhere concrete or some place in particular, then the definite article ***the*** is required.	*Compare:* • I went to **the** sea/seaside to swim. I stayed by **the** sea/seaside all day. • What's on in **the** town (=a particular town, not necessarily my own) this weekend? • How do I get out of **the** town? • Sally spent all day in **the** office (=her workplace). She didn't get out of **the** office until 7 o'clock.
No article is needed before television as a medium, only as an appliance.	• Carol saw her brother on television. *Compare:* • She had an indoor antenna on **the** television.
There is no article before a noun followed by a categorizing letter or number.	• The students have just read chapter 10. • The train is about to depart from track 5. • Her flight leaves from gate 32. • He fell asleep on page 816 of *War and Peace*. • She is staying in room 689.
No article is needed in front of *most* roads, streets, parks, squares or bridges.	• Main Street, University Avenue, Central Park, Times Square, Tower Bridge, etc.
No article is needed in the names of single mountains.	• While in France he climbed Mount Blanc.
To give added punch, articles are often dropped in the titles of books, movies, music and other works of art. Even if an article exists in the original title, as in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings'*, people tend to omit this when making reference to it in everyday speech or writing.	• *"Journey into Hell"* sounds even more exciting than *"The Journey into Hell"*. • "Have you read *Lord of the Rings'*?
In order to save space, articles are usually dropped in headlines.	• "Iraqi Head Seeks Arms" • "Stolen Painting Found by Tree" • "Police Confirm Shotgun Attack on Bullet Train"