



Articles: using 'a', 'an' and 'the'

A/an: introducing what is new

- We use **a/an** with singular nouns to indicate:
 - that something is not common ground, and
 - that we are introducing something new/unexpected to the reader.

Example

I have just seen **an** accident.

- **An** is used (instead of **the**) because this event is something you do not know about.
- It tells you that I do not expect you to look around you or identify which accident I am referring to.
- It is unfamiliar to you.

The: indicating 'common ground'

- **The** is used to signal readers that they know or will soon know what we are referring to.
- **The** triggers the reader to search for the most obvious area of common ground in order to identify this.
- Context is usually the most important factor to help the reader comprehend the message successfully.
- We use **the** with a noun to refer backwards or forwards in a text or conversation.
- We also use **the** to refer to our shared experience or general knowledge.

Example: referring backwards

When I was out I passed a young couple with two little girls and a boy. I thought I knew **the** parents but I did not recognise **the** children at all.

Referring to the
young couple

Referring to the two
little girls and a boy

Example: referring forwards

Take prizes for **the** children who win.

Those children
who will win



Example: external reference

Shouldn't we pick up **the** children soon.

Shared knowledge:
our children

- **The** is also used when something is immediately defined.

Example

The next-door children are a pain.

Those who live
next door

No article: Generalisations

- We leave out articles before plural and uncountable nouns when we are referring to something general.

Example

I usually have [] sandwiches for lunch.

[] English parsley has curly leaves.

References

Adapted from Parrott, M 2010, *Grammar for English language teachers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.