



# 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.