

1. Use of a/an

(a) We use a/an before singular countable nouns.

a student a book an idea

We do not use a/an before plural countable nouns. For example, we cannot say a students or an ideas

We do not normally use a/an before uncountable nouns . For example, we cannot say

A water or a music

We do not use singular countable nouns alone, without a/an , the ,my ,this ,etc .
I'm a student .(not .I'm student)

(b) We use a/an when the listener or reader does not know exactly which person or thing we mean .

There is a book on the table. (we don't know which book)

He met a girl last night .She works in a bank.

(We don't know which girl, or which bank)

We use a/an when we say that someone or something is

I'm an architect. He's a vegetarian. It was a good film.

2. Use of the

(a) We use the with singular countable nouns, plural countable nouns, and uncountable nouns

the man the shoes the water

(b) We use the when the listener or reader knows exactly which person or thing we mean;

-We use the to talk about people and things that we have already mentioned.

I met a girl and a boy. I didn't like the boy much, but the girl was very nice.

My father bought a shirt and some shoes. The shoes were quite expensive.

-We use the when we say which people or things we mean.

Who is the man over there talking to Sue?

-We use the when it is clear from the situation which people or things we mean.

Where's Simon? He's in the bathroom.(= the bathroom in this house)

Could you switch on the light? (=the light in this room)

I got into a taxi. The driver asked me where I wanted to go. (= the driver of the taxi that I got into)

-We use the when there is only one of something eg. The sun, the moon, the sky, the earth , the world

I enjoy lying in the sun.

Would you like to travel round the world?

3. Talking in general : the

1. The +noun

(a) We sometimes use the with a singular countable noun to talk about something in general .

This happens , for example, with the names of animals, flowers and plants.

The dolphin is an intelligent animal. (the dolphin= dolphins in general)

The orchid is a beautiful flower. (the orchid= orchid in general)

(b)We also use the in a general sense with the names of musical instruments and specific inventions.

She can play the guitar and the piano.

Marconi invented the radio.

(c)Some common expressions with the have a general meaning e.g the town, the country (side) , the sea(side) , the mountains , the rain, the wind, the sun (shine) , the snow

I enjoy going for long walks in the country.

I help often go to the mountains at weekends.

I like the sound of the rain.

(d)We also use the cinema and the theatre with a general meaning.

Which do you prefer , the cinema or the theatre ?

(2) The +adjective

(a) We can use the before some adjectives e.g.young ,old, rich, poor , blind with a general meaning .

The young should listen to the old.

(the young= young people in general ; the old = old people in general)

(b)We also use the before some nationality words. E.g English, Italian, French, Swiss, Japanese to mean the people of that country.

The English drink a lot of tea.

Note that these words all end in –sh (e.g the English, the Irish) , -ch (the French, the Dutch) or –ese (the Japanese , the Chinese)

With other nationalities we use a plural noun ending in –s with or without the e.g (the) Italians , (the) Germans

1.We use these nouns without an article when we think about the main purpose of the place.

(a)Compare

I think I'll go to bed early tonight. There are some shoes under the bed.
(to sleep)

Maria goes to school every morning. The school was painted last month.
(to study)

Mr Woods has gone into hospital. Sarah met Simon outside the hospital.
(for medical treatment)

(b)We normally use work and home without an article.

What time do you usually go to work?

Would you like to stay at home this evening ?

(2) Means of transport

We use by car/bus/train/plane etc ,without an article, to talk about how we travel.

I usually go to work by car.

We went to Rome by train.

We also say on foot (=walking) e.g I came home on foot.

(3) Meals

We do not normally use an article with the names of meals .

What time do you usually have breakfast?

When would you like to have dinner ?