

Section 2: Known And Unknown

Part 2.1: Explanation

2.1.1 Particular and general

Sometimes when we use a noun, we're talking about a specific thing, or a specific set of things. For example, I can talk about one particular book that I have in my mind. I can also talk about a particular set of books. When I do this, I'm not talking about all books. On the other hand, sometimes we want to use a noun in general. I can talk about all the books in the world, about books in general.

In this section, we're going to discuss how to use *a/an* and *the* with a particular noun or a particular group of nouns. We'll discuss how to talk about nouns in general in [Section 3](#).

2.1.2 Known and unknown

When I am thinking of a specific thing or a specific group of things, I use *the* when I think the person listening or reading **will** know (or will be able to work out) which thing or person I'm talking about. On the other hand, I use *a/an* (for singular countable nouns) or 'no article' (for plural and uncountable nouns) when I think the listener or reader **won't** know which thing or person I mean.

The important point is whether the person **who is listening** knows what the speaker is thinking of, or will be able to work it out. We know that the person who is speaking knows which thing(s) he or she means. For example:

- I bought **a** blue sweater yesterday [the speaker knows which sweater, but the listener doesn't, so we use *a*].
- We went to **a** lovely café [the speaker knows which one but the listener doesn't, so we use *a*].

Remember:

- If the listener knows which one(s), we use *the* (with any kind of noun).
- If the listener doesn't know which one(s):
 - we use *a/an* with singular countable nouns
 - we use 'no article' with plural countable nouns or uncountable nouns.

Sometimes neither the person speaking nor the person listening knows which particular thing or things the speaker is thinking about. We'll discuss this in [Section 5](#). In the rest of this section we'll look at some ways in which the listener might know what the speaker is thinking about.

Part 2.2: The listener's surroundings

Sometimes the listener knows which one we mean because of the place we are in. He or she might be able to see or understand the thing we are talking about. For example:

- Pass me **the** glass [if there's only one glass that we can see, then the listener knows which one I mean, because there's no other choice].
- I'll put **the** dishwasher on [I mean the dishwasher that's in the same room as us].

If there is more than one thing and we are talking about them all, we can still use *the*:

- Please close **the** windows [several windows are open, and I want you to close all of them].

But sometimes, if there is more than one, the listener may not know which one I mean, so I can use *a/an*:

- Please close **the** window [only one is open, so the listener is sure which one I mean].
- Please close **a** window [three are open, so the listener isn't sure which one].

The situation we are in could also be something bigger, like the building, town, city or country we are in. For example:

- I went to **the** cafeteria, but it was closed [the cafeteria in our building].
- You can buy apples at **the** market [the market in our town].

Remember: if we use *the*, it has to be clear to the listener which person or thing we mean.

EXERCISE 2.1

Fill the gap with *a/an* or *the* (this exercise only has singular countable nouns).

1. Sorry, I've spilled water on _____ book [there's only one book on the table so the listener knows which book].
2. Sorry, I've spilled water on _____ book [there are lots of books on the table, and it's not clear to the listener which book].
3. She needs _____ chair from the dining room [the listener can see that there are several chairs in the dining room].
4. She needs _____ chair from the dining room [the listener can see that there's only one chair in the dining room].
5. Would you mind opening _____ door? [I mean the door of the room we are in.]
6. He walked into _____ door and hit his head [the listener doesn't know which door].
7. She fell into _____ river [there's one river in our town].
8. She fell into _____ river [the listener doesn't know which river – it could be any river in the country].

9. I had dinner in _____ Chinese restaurant [I mean the one near our house].

10. I had dinner in _____ Chinese restaurant [there are hundreds in London and the listener doesn't know which one].

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

Part 2.3: Larger situation / general knowledge / unique things

Above, we saw that we can use *the* when the listener knows which one we mean because of the room or building or town we are in. If there is only one of something in the room, for example, we can use *the* because it's clear which one we mean. For the same reason, we can use *the* with nouns when it's clear to the listener which one we mean because of the country we're in:

- **The** Queen was on television yesterday [if I am in England when I say this, you will understand that I mean the Queen of England].
- I think we should support **the** government [I mean the government of the country that I'm in].
- Our recent problems with **the** economy have really affected **the** middle class [I mean the economy and the middle class of the country that I'm in].

Sometimes, there is only one of something on our planet, or in our solar system, or even in the universe. We use *the* with these words, as it's clear which one we mean. For example, we use *the* with *sun* as there's only one sun close to us and everybody knows which one we mean:

- **The** sun was very hot that day.

In the same way, we often use *the* if there is only one group of something:

- I loved learning about **the** planets in school.

Here is a list of some words (sometimes called 'unique things') that are often used in this way:

the sun	Don't look directly at the sun.
the moon	She could see the moon from her bedroom window.
the stars	The stars are difficult to see clearly.
the sky	The sky was a lovely shade of blue.
the universe	The universe is vast.
the planets	I would love to visit the planets.
the world	It's the best city in the world.

the solar system	The alien travelled to the edge of the solar system.
the air	The bird flew off into the air.

Of course, we can also use many of these words as normal nouns, if we need to. When I say 'the moon', you understand that I mean our moon, the moon that circles the earth. But Jupiter (for example) also has moons. In this case, I can use 'moon' as a normal noun:

- Jupiter has **a** moon called Io.

See also [Part 4.15](#) for words that seem to be unique, but are not used in this way.

Part 2.4: Information in the rest of the sentence

Sometimes the listener knows which one we mean because we make it clear in our sentence, by using certain grammar or vocabulary.

2.4.1 Relative clauses

We can use different grammatical structures to say which one we mean. We often use relative clauses. For example:

- John knows **the** girl that I met yesterday.

Remember, it needs to be clear to the listener which one we mean from the relative clause plus what the listener knows. If it's not obvious, and the listener doesn't know which one we're talking about, we can still use *a/an* even if we use a relative clause.

For example:

- I saw John talking to **a** girl that I met last night. [Even though there is a relative clause, I think the listener may not know exactly which girl, so I use *a*. Maybe I met several girls last night, or maybe the listener wasn't with me last night, so he doesn't know which girl I mean.]
- I saw John talking to **the** girl that I met last night. [I can use *the* because I think the listener does know which girl I mean. Maybe the listener also met the girl last night, for example.]

Even if you give lots of information about the noun, you can still use *a/an* if you think the listener doesn't know which one you mean:

- I met **a** girl last night who has red hair and who was wearing a black dress and whose mother is a doctor.

EXERCISE 2.2

Fill the gap with *the* if the listener knows which one from the rest of the sentence, or use *a/an* if the listener doesn't know (I'm assuming that, for this exercise, the relative clause makes it clear to the listener which one).

1. I drank _____ cup of coffee that I'd just bought.

2. I drank _____ cup of coffee.

3. John's going out with _____ French girl who we met last week.

4. John's going out with _____ French girl.

5. I bought _____ new laptop.

6. I bought _____ laptop that I told you about.

7. David had dinner in _____ restaurant.

8. David had dinner in _____ restaurant that he usually goes to.

9. He played _____ piece of music.

10. He played _____ piece of music that we were discussing yesterday.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

2.4.2 Prepositional phrases

In the same way, we often use prepositional phrases (*on the table, by the station, under the desk, in the cupboard*) to say which one we mean. For example:

- Pass me **the** book on the table [we can see that there's only one book on the table, so it's clear which one I mean].
- I often go to **the** café by the station [the listener lives in my town, so I think he knows about that particular café].
- Could you grab **the** brush in the cupboard? [I know there's only one brush, so when you open the cupboard, you will see which brush I mean.]

As with relative clauses, we only use *the* with a prepositional phrase if we think the listener will know which one we mean or will be able to work out which one we mean. For example:

- I've left **a** book on the table [maybe the listener didn't see which book].
- I often go to **a** café by the station [maybe the listener doesn't know my town, so he doesn't know which café I mean].

Exercise 2.3

Fill the gap with *the* if the listener knows which one from the rest of the sentence, or use *a/an* if the listener doesn't know (I'm assuming that, for this exercise, the prepositional phrase makes it clear to the listener which one).

1. Let's meet in _____ café.

2. Let's meet in _____ café next to my flat.

3. I picked up _____ piece of paper on the floor.

4. I picked up _____ piece of paper.

5. Could you put these flowers on _____ table?

6. Could you put these flowers on _____ table next to the door?
7. I put my new cushion on _____ chair.
8. I put my new cushion on _____ chair next to the fireplace.
9. She bought a new dress in _____ shop.
10. She bought a new dress in _____ shop next to the supermarket.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

2.4.3 *Of*-phrases

We often use *of*-phrases, such as *the back of*, to tell the listener which one we mean. Because something only has one back, for example, we usually use *the* when we talk about it, as we expect the listener to be able to work out which back we mean. Here is a list of some words that we can use in this way:

the back of	I wrote her number on the back of my notebook.
the front of	The front of the dress was blue.
the middle of	She sat down in the middle of the floor.
the top of	He stood at the top of the stairs and waited.
the bottom of	The answers are at the bottom of the page.
the edge of	I tripped on the edge of the pavement.
the beginning of	At the beginning of the book, she is living in Paris.
the end of	They got married at the end of the film.
the height of	What's the height of Mount Fuji?
the length of	He ran the length of the football pitch.
the size of	I was amazed at the size of his house.
the weight of	I can't guess the weight of the cake.
the title of	What's the title of the film that we saw last week?
the price of	The price of flats here is very high.

2.4.4 Certain adjectives

In the same way, there are some adjectives which we often use to talk about only one thing (or one group of things). For example, if I say 'the last bus' I use *the* because only one bus can be last, so the listener knows which one I mean. Here's a list of adjectives that we often use with *the* when they are followed by nouns:

same	He was wearing the same T-shirt as me.
next	Let's get on the next train that comes.
last	We caught the last bus home.
only	Coffee is the only thing I want right now.
right / correct	It's the right answer.
wrong*	I'm afraid that's the wrong answer.
usual	We went to the usual restaurant.

*It is a bit strange to talk about 'the wrong answer' when there are usually lots of wrong answers to any question, but it is correct.

See [Part 7.11](#) for *next* and *last* with time expressions. See also [Part 7.12](#) for a similar use of *first/second/third*.

EXERCISE 2.4

Fill the gap with *a/an* or *the*.

1. Julie crashed her bike into _____ tree.
2. Julie crashed her bike into _____ only tree in her garden.
3. We went to _____ restaurant.
4. We went to _____ usual restaurant.
5. John has _____ yellow car.
6. John has _____ same yellow car as Mike.
7. Let's get _____ taxi.
8. Let's get _____ next taxi.
9. He brought _____ cake.
10. He brought _____ wrong cake.
11. She put down _____ card and won the game.
12. She put down _____ right card and won the game.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

2.4.5 Superlatives

If we use a superlative adjective ('**the tallest** student in the class') then there is obviously only one (or one group) of the thing we are talking about. There is one student who is the tallest in the class, and because it's clear to the listener which one we mean, we usually use *the*:

- She's **the** most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

- It's **the** best café in London.
- John and Lisa are **the** most intelligent students here.
- This bowl is **the** biggest one.

Remember, we don't use *the* when there is a possessive:

- He's my best student.
- That's our most important goal.

It's possible to drop *the* when the adjective is used later in the sentence, rather than directly before the noun. We can choose either *the* or 'no article', with no change in meaning:

- She is (the) most beautiful.
- This café is (the) best.
- John and Lisa are (the) most intelligent.
- This bowl is (the) biggest.

This is not possible when the adjective comes directly before the noun:

- ~~He is fastest swimmer.~~

EXERCISE 2.5

Fill the gap with *the* if it's necessary. If you can choose, use 'no article' (\emptyset).

1. Everest is _____ highest mountain in the world.
2. Who is _____ oldest person in your family?
3. This dress was _____ cheapest.
4. Which language do you think is _____ easiest to learn?
5. This book is _____ most serious one on the topic.
6. I think that one over there is _____ strongest horse.
7. This film is _____ shortest.
8. She's _____ fastest runner in her school.
9. That suitcase is _____ lightest.
10. Out of all the cities in Europe, London is _____ biggest.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

With superlative adverbs, we can also choose to use *the* or 'no article':

- Luke reads (the) fastest.
- I like vanilla ice cream (the) best.

- She can speak six languages, but she speaks Spanish (the) most confidently.

These examples all compare one person or thing with other people or things. However, sometimes we compare a person or thing in one situation with the same person or thing in a different situation. In this case, when the superlative adjective or adverb is later in the sentence, we usually don't use *the*.

Compare these two sentences:

- I'm \emptyset most productive early in the morning [I'm more productive in the morning than I am in the afternoon or the evening].
- I'm **the** most productive early in the morning [I'm more productive than the other people in my office first thing in the morning].

More examples:

- Julie does swimming, running and cycling. She's always \emptyset most tired after cycling.
- John types \emptyset most quickly when he's drunk a lot of coffee!
- Tea is \emptyset best when you drink it very hot.
- London is \emptyset most depressing in January.

EXERCISE 2.6

If it's possible to choose between *the* and 'no article', put *the*. Otherwise, put 'no article' (\emptyset).

1. I read a lot of books on the subject and this one is _____ best.
2. I wake up _____ earliest on Mondays, as I go to a yoga class. On other days I sleep later.
3. Amanda's _____ happiest when she's on holiday.
4. Which student in the class is _____ happiest?
5. This juice is _____ most delicious if you chill it for a long time first.
6. The British Library is _____ best in the mornings. It's too crowded in the afternoons.
7. John is _____ calmest when he's working.
8. Of all the people in our office, Adrian is _____ calmest.
9. Lucy wakes up _____ earliest in her family.
10. Which juice is _____ most delicious? Apple juice, orange juice or raspberry juice?

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

See also [Part 7.8](#) for *most* and *the most*.

Part 2.5: Something we've already talked about

The listener might know which one we mean because we've already talked about the thing in our conversation (or piece of writing):

- I bought **an** apple and an orange. **The** apple was delicious.

I use *an* at first because I think the person listening won't know which apple or which orange I am talking about. But the second (or third or fourth...) time I talk about something, I can use *the* because the listener knows which one. He or she knows because I've already said which one – it's the apple that I bought yesterday (for example) and not another apple.

However, notice that this use of *the* is not very common, because usually when we talk about a thing or person more than once, we use a pronoun the second (or third or fourth...) time:

- I bought **an** apple. **It** was delicious. **It** was very juicy and **it** had shiny red skin.

EXERCISE 2.7

Fill the gaps with *a* or *the*.

1. He gave me _____ clock and _____ picture as a wedding present. _____ clock belonged to his grandmother.
2. I took _____ suitcase and _____ backpack on holiday. _____ suitcase was much more useful.
3. John broke _____ vase when he was in Marie's house. _____ vase was over 100 years old.
4. Julie read _____ book and _____ magazine. She said _____ book was quite boring, though.
5. I washed _____ white shirt and _____ red top together. Now _____ shirt is pink.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

Again, we can't use *a/an* with uncountable nouns or plural countable nouns. In these cases, if we are introducing something for the first time that our listener doesn't know about, we use 'no article', not *a/an*. (We can also use *some* or another word that tells us the amount depending on the situation: see [Appendix 3](#).)

- I bought beef, vegetables and milk. **The** beef was very good.
- Her house is full of DVDs and books. **The** books are mostly about Africa.

EXERCISE 2.8

Fill the gaps with *a/an* or 'no article' (\emptyset). (Remember, all of these are being introduced for the first time and we think the listener doesn't know which one(s) we mean.)

1. She gave us _____ bread and _____ orange juice. The orange juice was delicious.
2. I got _____ book and _____ magazine from the library.
3. We watched _____ films and _____ TV programmes all night. The films were better.

4. She offered us _____ piece of cake or _____ biscuits.
5. We had _____ broccoli and _____ cheese for dinner.
6. I dropped _____ glass and two bowls. They all broke.
7. We cooked _____ spaghetti and _____ bacon. John had bought the spaghetti in Rome.
8. She has _____ black umbrella and I have _____ blue one. The blue one is much bigger.
9. We had _____ piece of pie and _____ potatoes for lunch. The pie was very good indeed.
10. I took _____ bottle of wine and _____ box of chocolates to the party.
11. I drank _____ cup of coffee and ate _____ biscuits. The biscuits had been made by my mother.
12. She bought _____ shoes and _____ dress to wear to her sister's wedding.
13. Ruth has _____ son and _____ two daughters. One of the daughters is in my class.
14. They drank _____ water and _____ tea.
15. At the weekend, I crashed my bike into _____ car.
16. I moved into _____ new flat last month. It's really lovely.
17. Could you get _____ milk and _____ bar of chocolate when you are at the shop?
18. I had _____ pasta and _____ glass of wine last night. The pasta was really good.
19. I spilled _____ coffee on the sofa and I dropped _____ jug of milk on the floor.
20. John has _____ orange chairs and _____ green carpets!

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

We can also use *the* after we have introduced something and then we use a different word to talk about the same thing:

- A female student came in. **The** girl ... [Here, *the girl* is the same person as *a female student* so the listener knows which one we mean because we have already mentioned her.]

Again, we often use a pronoun, rather than *the + noun* in this case:

- A female student came in. **She** ...

Part 2.6: We've talked about something connected

We can also use *the* to talk about things which we haven't already talked about directly but which we can understand from something else that we've said. In the example below, we know that houses have front doors:

- We arrived at a house. **The** front door was open. [In this case we know *the front door* is the door of the house we've just talked about. We think the listener will understand

which door we mean, but we use *a* when we introduce the house because we don't think the listener will know which house we mean.]

- I wanted to buy a new coat but **the** sleeves were too long. [We think our listener will understand that we mean 'the sleeves of the coat that I just mentioned'.]
- We went for a walk in the park. **The** lake was frozen and **the** ducks looked cold. [We think our listener will understand that we mean 'the lake and the ducks in the park that I just mentioned'. Even though not all parks have lakes or ducks, it's quite common.]
- I've just joined a new gym. **The** swimming pool is very big. [We think our listener will understand that we mean 'the swimming pool in the gym that I just mentioned'. Again, not all gyms have swimming pools, but many do.]

On the other hand, if the second noun is something that isn't always (or isn't often) connected with the first noun, then we use *a/an* or 'no article' in the usual way. In the example below, we know that houses don't usually have lorries outside:

- We arrived at a house. **A** lorry was parked outside.

EXERCISE 2.9

Fill the gaps with *a/an* or *the*.

1. I bought _____ new dress, but I was annoyed to find that _____ zip was broken.
2. They stopped for _____ picnic. However, _____ lemonade was warm.
3. Amelia went to _____ restaurant. She saw _____ famous actress there.
4. She sat down on _____ chair, and started reading _____ book.
5. They hired _____ car on holiday, but when they opened _____ boot, _____ cat was hiding inside!

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

Part 2.7: There is / there are

On the other hand, we use some expressions when we **don't** think that the listener will know which thing(s) we mean. One of these expressions is *there is / there are*.

There in English has two meanings. The first meaning is 'in a certain place'. For example:

- Your keys are **there** [*there* = 'on the table'].
- **There** are the books that I lost! [*There* = 'under the bed'].

When *there* means 'in a certain place', there is no special article use. In 'there are the books that I lost' I use *the* because I explain which books I mean with the relative clause 'that I lost' (see [Part 2.4.1](#)). We often stress *there* when it has this meaning.

The second use of *there* means 'something exists'. For example:

- **There's** a post office in my town. ['A post office exists in my town' – I don't say exactly where it is.]
- **Is there** a bank nearby? ['Does a bank exist nearby?']
- **There are** two train stations in Glasgow. ['Two train stations exist in Glasgow.']
- **There are** butterflies in my garden. ['Butterflies exist in my garden.']
- **There is** always traffic on this road. ['Traffic always exists on this road.']

In this second case, we very often use *a/an* with a singular noun. With a plural noun, it's normal to use a number, or 'no article'.

Section 2 Review Exercises

EXERCISE 2.10

Choose *a/an, the* or 'no article' (\emptyset).

1. William is _____ cutest baby in London.
2. Let's start again from _____ beginning of the song.
3. I bought _____ new dress.
4. Which is your favourite city in _____ world?
5. He was wearing _____ same T-shirt as his brother.
6. I'll meet you in _____ usual place.
7. This is _____ only dress I could find.
8. Today is _____ coldest day of the year.
9. I bought _____ wrong book.
10. He bought a pen and some paper in the shop. _____ pen was red.
11. She crashed her bicycle into a car and broke _____ wheel.
12. She lay on her back on the grass and looked at _____ sky.
13. Everest is _____ highest mountain in the world.
14. I had _____ cup of tea and _____ biscuit. They were both delicious.
15. Please pass _____ water jug [there is one water jug on our table].
16. Have you read _____ book that I lent you?
17. I love looking at _____ planets on a clear night.
18. There's _____ dirt all over his jeans.
19. What's _____ title of the film that you saw last night?

20. There's _____ post office near the bank.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

EXERCISE 2.11

Choose *a/an, the* or 'no article' (\emptyset).

1. The page number is at _____ bottom of each page.
2. How many planets are in _____ solar system?
3. We ate _____ sandwiches and drank _____ water.
4. I bought a new dress. It has a pattern on _____ sleeves.
5. I had _____ cup of coffee for breakfast.
6. I met a man and a woman last night. _____ woman was from Mexico.
7. She bought _____ new laptop.
8. There are _____ people outside.
9. She wants to sit in _____ armchair [there is only one armchair in this room].
10. In the countryside, you can see _____ stars much more clearly than in the city.
11. There's _____ good hairdresser on that road.
12. I had _____ bread and cheese for lunch.
13. It's not good for your eyes to look directly at _____ sun.
14. Where's _____ shop that John works in?
15. I've got _____ tent, but it's very old. You can borrow it if you want.
16. They went for a walk and looked at _____ moon.
17. It's on _____ back of the page.
18. She gave me _____ last chocolate.
19. She put _____ book in her bag [you don't know which book].
20. She bought _____ laptop that her brother recommended.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)

EXERCISE 2.12

Choose *a/an, the* or 'no article' (\emptyset).

1. I had lunch in a lovely restaurant. _____ main course was excellent.

2. Julie has _____ sister and two brothers.

3. Please pass me _____ coffee on the table [there is one cup of coffee and one table near us].

4. Sorry, that's _____ wrong book. I need the one by David Jones.

5. It's amazing to think about how big _____ universe is.

6. John is _____ tallest in his family.

7. There are _____ spiders in the bath.

8. We rented _____ car on holiday.

9. She walked into a beautiful house. _____ kitchen was near _____ front door.

10. There's _____ Japanese restaurant near my house.

11. The artist's name is on _____ back of the painting.

12. I bought _____ new computer.

13. My brother is in _____ middle of the photo.

14. She got _____ new shoes last weekend.

15. Which is _____ right answer?

16. There's _____ luggage in the hall.

17. This is _____ most beautiful painting that I've ever seen.

18. I visited _____ old castle yesterday.

19. I bought a new bicycle, but _____ seat is really uncomfortable.

20. At _____ end of the book, they fell in love.

[\(Click here for answers.\)](#)