

Articles

English Grammar · A2

a / an

Choosing an article

a / an	the	(none)
one, not specific	the specific one	general / names
<i>a book · an apple</i>	<i>close the door</i>	<i>I like music</i>

Choosing an article: reference card grid

a and **an** are indefinite articles, used before **singular countable nouns** to mean “one (non-specific)”.

- **a** is used before **consonant sounds**: a book, a car, a university (pronounced /j/ sound).
- **an** is used before **vowel sounds**: an apple, an hour (h is silent).

I have a question.

I have a question.

She is an engineer.

She is an engineer.

Note: Look at the **pronunciation**, not the letter: an **h**our (h is silent → an), a **u**niversity (pronounced /j/ → a).

the

the is the definite article, indicating **specificity** — both speaker and listener know exactly which one.

Please close the door.

Please close (this) door.

Common uses of the:

- When mentioned previously or referred to again: *I saw a cat. The cat was black.* (I saw a cat. That cat was black.)
- For unique things in the world: the sun, the moon.
- Before superlatives: the best, the tallest.

The sun is very bright today.

The sun is very bright today.

Zero Article

Sometimes **no article** (zero article) is placed before a noun:

- **Plural / uncountable nouns** expressing generalization: *I like music.* (I like music.) *Cats are cute.* (Cats are cute.)
- **Proper nouns:** names, most countries, cities: China, Tom, Beijing.
- Some fixed phrases: go to **school** / **bed** / **work** (indicating purpose, without the).

I go to school by bike.

I go to school by bike.

Water is important.

Water is important.

Note: Do not use **the** when plural / uncountable nouns express generalization: ~~I like the music~~ (general sense) × → I like music ✓.

Common Errors

- × ~~I want to be teacher.~~ → ✓ I want to be **a** teacher. — Add a / an before professions; direct translation of Chinese “to be a teacher” often omits this.
- × ~~I went to home.~~ → ✓ I went **home**. — home is used as an adverb here: go home, get home; do not use to or the before it.
- × ~~He plays the football.~~ → ✓ He plays **football**. — No the before sports; but add the for instruments: play **the** piano / violin.
- Distinguish: go to **school** (attend school, purpose) vs go to **the** school (go to the school building, e.g., parents attending a meeting). Same logic applies to bed / hospital / work.