Correct use of *a/an* and *the* … and when they are not necessary

**the**

The definite article, *the*, is used for a variety purposes, but writers usually use it before entities (people, places, things, ideas, concepts) that are known to both the writer and reader. Therefore, the entity must have already been introduced. If not, the writer just assumes the reader will know the entity.

1. **Anaphoric use/ subsequent mention**: *the* usually appears before an entity that has already been introduced. In the example below, the woman has already been introduced in the first sentence, so she is known to both the writer and the reader by the subsequent mention.

   - **EXAMPLE:** A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. The woman is expected to fully recover.

2. **Indirect anaphoric use**: *the* often appears before an entity that is closely associated with a different entity that was already introduced. In the example below, the motorcycle has already been introduced in the first sentence, so the writer assumes that the reader will know there must have been a motorcyclist, too.

   - **EXAMPLE:** A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. The woman is expected to fully recover. The motorcyclist, however, is in critical condition.

3. **Use with synonyms**: *the* often appears with synonyms for an entity that has already been introduced.

   - **EXAMPLE:** A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. The woman is expected to fully recover. The motorcyclist, however, is in critical condition. Police say alcohol may have played a role in the accident.

4. **Cataphoric use**: an entity is sometimes defined (made definite) immediately after it is mentioned in a text. The noun’s post-modifier gives definiteness to the noun.

   - **EXAMPLE:** A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. The woman is expected to fully recover. The motorcyclist, however, is in critical condition. Police say alcohol may have played a role in the accident. The witness to the accident said the intersection where the accident took place is considered dangerous by most of the residents of the neighborhood.

5. **Situational use**: Usually in speech, but occasionally in writing, the situation (context) creates shared knowledge between the writer and the reader. In the example below, the number is visible to the reader.

   - **EXAMPLE:** A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. The woman is expected to fully recover. The motorcyclist, however, is in critical condition. Police
say alcohol may have played a role in the accident. The witness to the accident said the
tersection where the accident took place is considered dangerous by most of the residents
of the neighborhood. If anyone else has information about the accident, please contact the
police at the following number: 555-555-5555.

6. Use with plural proper nouns: For proper nouns (names of people, places, and concrete or
abstract things) that are plural (consist of more than one), the is often used.

- EXAMPLES: the Philippines, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Maldives/the
  Falkland Islands, the Bahamas, the Simpsons, all the Davids in class, the Beatles, the
  Rolling Stones, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

a/an

A and an are the two forms of the indefinite article. We say, “indefinite,” because a/an are used in front
of singular (countable) entities that are not defined. The indefinite article, a/an, is used for a variety
purposes, but writers usually use it before an undefined entity (a person, a place, a thing, an idea, a
concept). Because the entity is undefined, writer assumes it may not be known to the writer (or
speaker) and/or reader (or listener).

1. First mention: a/an usually appears before a singular common noun (not a proper noun with a
name, like Steve, and not a pronoun, like he, but a common noun, like boy) when mentioning it for
the first time in speech or in writing. Notice the difference between a/an and the in the following
example (taken from the previous section). Only the first time that the woman (a singular common is
mentioned is the indefinite article present:

- EXAMPLE: A woman was hospitalized yesterday after being hit by a motorcycle. The
  woman is expected to fully recover.

2. Specific use: A and an are used to introduce a specific, but still unknown member of a group. (If
the member is unknown, it probably was not mentioned yet, so this is first mention.) In the example
below, the group is “presidents” and the specific president has been chosen, so “president” is
specific.

- EXAMPLE: The university found a new president.

3. Unspecific use: A and an are “used to refer to one non-specific or non-particular member of a
group” (Owl at Purdue). In the example below, the group is “presidents” but the specific president
has not been chosen, so “president” is unspecified.

- EXAMPLE: The university is looking for a new president.

4. Classification: A and an are used to refer to one member from a class or group that it belongs to.
In the example below, “president” is a member (one published author) from a class/group (any/all
published authors).

- EXAMPLE: The university’s new president is a published author.
5. **Generic reference:** *A* and *an* can be used with a noun that serves as an example for the entire class/group. In the first example below, “a mother” means “all/every/any mothers.”

- **EXAMPLES:** A mother knows her children. (It means, “All/any mothers know their children.”) An animal’s life is as valuable as a human’s life. (It means “All animals are as valuable as all humans” or “Any animal is as valuable as any human.”)

### Zero article for indefinite meaning

The **zero article** is used for a variety of purposes, but (as with the indefinite *a/an*) writers usually use **zero article** before an undefined **uncountable** entity or before **plural countable** entities (people, places, things, ideas, concepts). Because the entity or entities are undefined, the writer assumes the entity or entities **may not be known to the writer and/or reader.**

1. In the example below, *bread* is an uncountable entity (*not* one bread or two breads), but we can count *Sundays* (one Sunday, two Sundays). The word *Sundays* is plural, therefore, we use **zero articles.**

- **EXAMPLE:** I like baking *bread* on *Sundays,*

2. **Institutions:** English writers **can** discuss institutions without counting them in certain contexts. English speakers may consider many entities as institutions, including meals (breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner), places (home, work, school, class, outside, inside, nature, church, jail, prison, college), industries, disciplines, programs, and more (mathematics, literature, engineering, IT, public health, social security).

- **EXAMPLES:** After I come *home* from *school,* I eat *lunch,* but then I have to leave for *work.* I wish I knew more about Latin American *literature.*

3. **Transportation and Communication:** English writers **can** use **zero article** before transportation, communication tools or machines if they are used with a preposition: by *car,* by *train,* by *plane,* by computer, by hand, over e-mail, by phone, via videoconference, by radio, via satellite, through discussion.

- **EXAMPLES:** I wrote this *by hand.* Are they traveling here *by plane* or *by car,*? We are meeting *via satellite* next week, but if you miss the meeting, we can communicate *over e-mail,* instead of talking *by phone,* let’s try to solve this problem *through* face-to-face discussion at our next meeting.

4. **Times:** English writers **usually** discuss nouns of time with **zero article** if they are used with a preposition: at noon, at 3:00, by 5:00, by tomorrow, on Sunday, after Sunday, at sunset, at sunrise, at dawn, at dusk, in winter.

- **EXAMPLES:** In winter, I get up at sunrise because the winter sunrises are beautiful. In fact, I once saw a sunrise that was bright orange.

5. **Special positions:** When referring to some rare, special jobs, English speakers can use either *the* or **zero article.**
- **EXAMPLES:** Mike Myers was elected **chairmen** last year. Mike Myers was elected the **chairmen** last year.

6. **Parallelisms:** Sometimes **zero article** is used when comparing or contrasting undefined nouns that the writer thinks are similar or contrast each other.

- **EXAMPLES:** She moves from city to city. Sam’s up from morning until night. From batteries to pencils, that store has everything. Mother and baby are doing well. We had a great time at the game, just father and son.

7. **Vocatives:** Vocatives are titles. When addressing an individual directly by title, just as for names, no article is used.

- **EXAMPLES:** Doctor, do you need your stethoscope? Mom, I have a headache. Sir, you forgot your hat.

8. **Block language:** Block language is used in other news headlines, on labels, and on short messages or notes in order to save space, so articles may not be used.

- **EXAMPLE:** Man saves puppy from crocodile’s jaws. Please pick up new shower curtain for bathroom. Mailbox is full.

**Note 1:** An entity is “uncountable” if you cannot count it. In English, we cannot, for example, count advice: not *one advice, *two advices. Instead, we might count **units** of advice: one piece of advice or two pieces of advice. **Usually** entities like hope, ambition, anger, and joy are not countable, nor are entities like water, bread, rice, coffee, ice cream, sand, rain, snow, or sunshine. Instead of counting these entities, we might count **units** of them: a lot of hope / lots of hope, a slice of bread / slices of bread, a glass of water / glasses of water, a grain of rice / grains of rice, a drop of rain / drops of rain, a ray of sunshine / rays of sunshine. These **units** are (approximate) measurements.

**Works Consulted**