

Articles

English A2

What this topic teaches

A1 gave you the ticket: *a/an* for one unknown thing. A2 adds the spotlight: **the** for the exact one you and your listener both know. And the third article is invisible: **no article at all**.

- **a/an** = one of many, first mention : *I saw a dog*.
- **the** = this exact one, we both know which: *The dog was big*.
- **(zero)** = general ideas, plurals, uncountables: *Dogs are friendly*.
- Chinese manages with zero articles, so this whole topic is a new organ . Be patient: even advanced speakers miss sometimes, and the mistakes rarely break communication . They just sound like a foreign accent – which, to be fair, they are.

the: the spotlight

Use *the* when the listener knows **exactly which one**.

Situation	Example
second mention	I saw a dog. The dog was big.
shared knowledge	Close the door. (There is one door; we both see it.)
unique things	the sun, the moon, the internet
superlatives and order	the tallest boy, the first day

- Memory hook: *a* introduces a stranger; *the* greets an old friend. First mention, stranger; second mention, old friend.
- *the sun* – there is only one, so it is always an old friend.

The zero article: no ticket at all

General statements take no article.

- Plurals in general: *Dogs are friendly. Books are expensive.*
- Uncountables in general: *I like music. Water is important.*
- Names: *China, Beijing, Lin* – no article. (Rivers, mountain ranges and country groups are exceptions: *the Yangtze, the Alps, the United States*.)
- Meals and routines: *have lunch, go to school, go to bed.*
- △ *“I like the music”* means one specific music, like the song playing right now. Music in general: *I like music.*

The decision tree

Ask two questions:

1. **Does the listener know exactly which one?** Yes → *the*. No → next question.
 2. **Is it one countable thing?** Yes → *a/an*. No (plural, uncountable, general) → zero.
- *I need **a** pen.* (any pen – stranger) → *Where is **the** pen?* (our pen – old friend) → *Pens are useful.* (all pens – general)
 - Memory hook: stranger → old friend → everyone. *a* → *the* → zero.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **The automatic *the*.** Chinese has no articles, so learners sprinkle -flavoured *the* everywhere: *“I like the dogs.”* General love needs zero: *I like dogs*. Unless you mean those specific dogs. (Those specific dogs are honoured.)
- △ ***the* with institutions vs buildings.** *Go to school* = be a student there (institution, zero article). *Go to the school* = visit the building. *In hospital* (British) = as a patient; *at the hospital* = visiting. The article changes whether you are the patient or the visitor – choose carefully.
- △ **Languages and most countries take zero:** *I study English. I live in China.* But *the United States, the United Kingdom* keep their *the*. Countries with plural or “republic/kingdom” names keep the ceremony.
- △ **Second mention needs the switch.** *“I saw a dog. A dog was big.”* × – the dog is now an old friend: *The dog was big.*

Say it aloud

Tell a two-sentence story with the stranger-to-friend switch.

- I saw a cat this morning. The cat was sitting on my homework. The homework is unfinished. The cat is unbothered.
- A stranger knocked. The stranger wanted directions . Directions are free; the cat watched from the homework.
- General truths: Cats are calm. Homework is doomed . The sun will rise on both.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *I saw _____ dog. _____ dog was big.* – **a**, then **the**. Stranger, then old friend.
2. *_____ dogs are friendly.* (in general) – **zero article**. General plural: no ticket.
3. *Please close _____ door.* – **the**. Shared knowledge: we both see the one door.
4. *I like _____ music.* – **zero**. Music in general; *the music* is the song playing right now.
5. *She goes to _____ school by bus.* – **zero** (as a student, an institution). *The school* would make her a visitor to the building.