

Articles (advanced)

English Grammar · B2

Generic vs Specific Reference

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

At B2 level, the difficulty with articles lies in distinguishing **generic reference** from **specific reference**:

- **Generic reference** (whole categories): Plural / uncountable nouns, **no *the***.
- **Specific reference** (particular ones): Use ***the***.

Tigers are dangerous.

*Tigers are dangerous. (Refers to tigers in general, no *the*)

The tigers at the zoo are sleepy.

*The tigers in the zoo are sleepy. (Specific, use *the*)

Note: Abstract nouns are also used without *the* for generic reference: *Love is important.* (Love is important.) But *the love of a mother* uses *the* when referring specifically.

Fixed Collocations

In many collocations, article usage is **fixed** and must be memorized as a whole:

- **No article:** go to bed / school / work, by car / bus, at home, have breakfast.
- **Use *the*:** in the morning, play the piano, the same, listen to the radio.

I go to work by bus.

*I go to work by bus. (Neither *go to work* nor *by bus* takes an article)

Note: These collocations lack much logical reasoning; **memorizing them as fixed phrases** is most effective.

Common Errors

- × ~~the China / the Japan~~ → ✓ China / Japan; but ✓ **the** US, **the** UK, **the** Netherlands, **the** Philippines — Only countries with plural forms or “organizational” names take *the*.
- × ~~Most of people agree.~~ → ✓ **Most people** agree. / **Most of the** people in this room agree. — *most* goes directly before a noun; *most of* must be followed by *the* / *my* / *these* etc.
- Distinguish (British English): be **in hospital** (admitted as a patient) vs. go to **the hospital** (go to the building, e.g., to visit someone). The same applies to in prison / at school.
- **the + adjective** refers to a class of people: *The rich should help the poor.*