

Articles: a, an and the

CEFR A2-B1 • 20 questions • A4 / US Letter

New or known, sound not letter, and the zero article for general statements.

The rule

The big idea: new or known

- Use a or an for one thing the listener does not know yet: "I bought a shirt."
- Use the for something the listener can identify: "The shirt was too small."
- The second mention takes the: a shirt first, the shirt after.
- Words that only exist once take the: the sun, the moon, the sky, the internet, the government.

A or an: listen to the sound

- Use an before a vowel sound: an apple, an idea, an old house, an hour.
- Use a before a consonant sound: a book, a car, a university, a European country.
- The rule follows the sound, not the letter. "Hour" starts with an h but sounds like "our", so it takes an.
- "University" starts with a u but sounds like "you", so it takes a. The same is true of a useful app.
- Abbreviations follow their spoken sound: an MBA, a UFO, an SMS.

No article: plurals, uncountable nouns and general ideas

- No article before a plural noun used in general: "Cats are independent." Not "The cats are independent" when you mean all cats.
- No article before an uncountable noun used in general: "I like music", "Water boils at 100 degrees".
- No article with most countries, cities and languages: "She lives in Japan", "He speaks Italian".
- No article in many fixed places and times: go to bed, go to school, go to work, be at home, at night, in the morning, by car, on foot.

The: specific, obvious and unique

- Use the when both people can picture the thing: "Close the door" means the only door in the room.
- Use the with superlatives and ordinal numbers: the best day, the first time, the only option.
- Use the with the cinema, the theatre, the beach, the doctor when it is a known place: "I am going to the dentist."
- Use the with groups: the rich, the young, the French, the police.

Jobs, instruments and fixed patterns

- Jobs take a or an: "She is a teacher", "He is an engineer".
- Musical instruments take the: "I play the piano", "She plays the guitar". Sports take no article: "I play tennis".

- Some illnesses take the in British English: "I have a headache", "She has the flu".
- A few expressions change meaning with the: "go to school" (as a student) versus "go to the school" (to the building).

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. I bought ___ umbrella because it was raining.

2. She works as ___ engineer in Berlin.

3. ___ sun rises in the east.

4. I play ___ piano every evening.

5. Cats are independent animals. ___ cats next door are very friendly.

6. He studies at ___ university in Canada.

7. We waited for ___ hour at the station.

8. I like ___ music, especially jazz.

9. Please close ___ window. It is cold in here.

10. My sister is ___ nurse.

11. ___ information you sent me was very useful.

12. She goes to ___ work by bus every day.

13. We visited ___ Philippines last year.

14. He is ___ honest man.

15. I need ___ new phone. ___ phone I have is five years old.

16. ___ most students passed the exam.

17. They live in ___ Netherlands.

18. I am going to ___ dentist this afternoon.

19. Can you give me ___ advice?

20. This is ___ best coffee in town.

Answer key

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1. **an** — Umbrella starts with a vowel sound, so it takes an. This is the first mention, so a new item.
2. **an** — Engineer starts with a vowel sound, so an. Jobs take a or an.
3. **The** — There is only one sun, and everyone can identify it. That is the job of the.
4. **the** — Musical instruments take the: play the piano, play the guitar. Sports take no article.
5. **The** — The first sentence is general. The second sentence is about a known group, the cats next door, so it takes the.
6. **a** — University starts with a "you" sound, which is a consonant sound, so it takes a.
7. **an** — The h in hour is silent, so the word starts with a vowel sound and takes an.
8. **no article** — Music in general is uncountable, so it takes no article.
9. **the** — Both people know which window. A known, specific thing takes the.
10. **a** — A singular countable job noun takes a or an; nurse takes a.
11. **The** — The information is specific: the information that you sent. Use the.
12. **no article** — Fixed expressions such as go to work take no article.
13. **the** — Country names are usually used without an article, but a few take the, including the Philippines, the Netherlands and the United States.
14. **an** — The h in honest is silent, so the word starts with a vowel sound and takes an.
15. **a ... The** — The first phone is new information, so a. The second mention is known, so the.
16. **no article** — Most plus a plural noun takes no article: most students.
17. **the** — A small group of country names takes the, including the Netherlands and the Philippines.
18. **the** — Going to the dentist is a fixed phrase for the usual check-up, and both people know which appointment.
19. **no article** — Advice is uncountable, so it never takes a or an, and here it is not specific, so it takes no article.
20. **the** — Superlatives take the: the best coffee, the first time, the only option.