

The or no article: general and specific

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

The points to one specific thing. No article speaks about things in general. The difference changes the meaning of a sentence.

The rule

When the is the right choice

- Use the when both people know which thing you mean: "Close the door" (the only door in the room).
- Use the for a second mention: "I bought a shirt. The shirt was too small."
- Use the with superlatives and ordinals: the best day, the first train, the only answer.
- Use the with unique things: the sun, the moon, the sky, the internet, the president.

General ideas take no article

- Plural nouns talking about a whole group take no article: "Dogs are friendly", "Books are expensive."
- Uncountable nouns talking about a whole idea take no article: "Water is life", "I love coffee."
- A general statement about a job or a group uses the plural or the uncountable form without the: "Teachers work hard", "Money cannot buy happiness."
- The same nouns take the when you make them specific: "The dogs in this street are friendly", "The water in this bottle is warm."

Names, places and no article

- Most countries, cities, streets and continents take no article: France, Tokyo, Oxford Street, Asia.
- A few place names keep the: the United States, the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United Kingdom.
- Oceans, seas, rivers and mountain ranges take the: the Pacific, the Red Sea, the Nile, the Alps.
- Single mountains, lakes and islands take no article: Mount Fuji, Lake Como, Sicily.

Everyday zero article

- Meals, sports, games, languages, school subjects and transport take no article: breakfast, football, English, history, by bus.
- Fixed phrases with a purpose take no article: go to school, go to bed, go to work, be at home, be in hospital.
- The same words take the when the building or place is the point: "I went to the school to meet the teacher."
- Time phrases often have no article: at night, at noon, by day, last week, next year.

The and meaning change

- The can turn a general idea into a specific one: "Life is short" is a fact about everyone; "the life of a sailor" is one particular life.
- The with a singular countable noun makes a group sound formal: "The tiger is in danger" means tigers in

general.

- Institutions behave the same way: go to prison (as a prisoner), go to the prison (as a visitor).
- When the meaning depends on the article, choose the article last and ask: one known thing, or the idea in general?

Questions

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

1. ___ life is full of surprises.

2. ___ sun rises in the east.

3. I saw ___ dog. ___ dog was very old.

4. ___ dogs make wonderful pets.

5. ___ dogs next door bark every night.

6. She goes to ___ school by bus.

7. I went to ___ school to meet my daughter's teacher.

8. We visited ___ Netherlands in spring.

9. ___ Nile is the longest river in Africa.

10. He plays ___ tennis every Sunday.

11. She speaks ___ Japanese and ___ French.

12. ___ breakfast is included in the price.

13. ___ best day of my life was in Rome.

14. Mount Fuji is ___ highest mountain in Japan.

15. He goes to ___ work at eight.

16. ___ children need love and attention.

17. ___ children in this class are very quiet.

18. We crossed ___ Alps on our holiday.

19. She is at ___ home now.

20. ___ money cannot buy happiness.

Answer key

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1. **no article** — Life in general takes no article, because the sentence is about everyone.
2. **The** — The sun is unique, so the article the is required.
3. **a ... The** — First mention takes a. The second mention is specific, so it takes the.
4. **no article** — A plural noun for a whole group takes no article.
5. **The** — These dogs are specific animals, so the article the is correct.
6. **no article** — School as a purpose takes no article, and so does by bus.
7. **the** — The school is a specific building here, so it takes the.
8. **the** — The Netherlands is one of the country names that keep the article the.
9. **The** — River names take the, and this one is also specific.
10. **no article** — Sports take no article in general statements.
11. **no article ... no article** — Languages take no article when you name them in general.
12. **no article** — Meals take no article in this fixed pattern, so the zero article is correct.
13. **The** — A superlative takes the article the.
14. **the** — The superlative highest requires the, and single mountains take no article before their name.
15. **no article** — Work as an activity takes no article in the fixed phrase go to work.
16. **no article** — A plural noun for a general group takes no article.
17. **The** — These children are a specific group, so the article the is needed.
18. **the** — Mountain ranges take the article the.
19. **no article** — The fixed phrase at home takes no article.
20. **no article** — An uncountable noun about a general idea takes no article.