Definite article (the) or indefinite article (a/an)?

I rang for a taxi. The taxi was late. There's a man at the bus stop. He's an old man.

A

1 Amy found a ring. Do we know which ring she found? ..........  

Look at Picture 2. Complete the sentences, using a or the.

2 Do we know which ring it is? – Yes, it's the ring she found.
3 Amy's with friend. We don't know which friend. She's got a lot of friends.

B

Amy lives with her friend Emma near London. They live in a flat. It's a nice flat, but the rooms are small. There isn't a table in the kitchen, so they eat in the living room. Emma works in an office in the centre of London, and Amy teaches English at a language school.

1 What's the flat like? Describe it by completing this sentence: ........ ...... ................. flat.
2 There isn't a table in the kitchen. Why do we say in the kitchen here?  
a) Because we don't know which kitchen.  
or b) Because we mean a particular kitchen – the kitchen in their flat. □  
3 Why do we say in the centre of London?  
a) Because London has only got one centre. or b) Because we don't know which centre. □

REMEMBER!

Complete these rules and examples, by underlining the correct alternative.

1 We use (a, an / the) when we mention a thing or a person for the first time. It's indefinite.
   We don't say which thing or which person.
   Example: Amy's got (a / the) computer.

2 (A, An / The) has a 'definite' meaning. We know which thing or person we're talking about.
   Example: (A / The) living room in Amy's flat is very small.

3 We use (a, an / the) when only one exists.
   Example: Amy uses (an / the) Internet a lot. (There's only one Internet.)

4 We use (a, an / the) to say what a thing or a person is like, or what kind of thing or person we're talking about.
   Examples: Emma's (a / the) very interesting person.

   Can you describe the ring that Amy found? – It was (a / the) diamond ring.
Definite article (the) or indefinite article (a/an)?

I rang for a taxi. The taxi was late. There’s a man at the bus stop. He’s an old man.

The problem: Students often mistakenly use the when it isn’t clear which thing or person they’re talking about, and a/an when it is clear which thing or which person.

Alternatively, they use no article at all.

Typical mistakes: Answer a telephone! Did you like a boy you danced with?
I’ve got the surprise for you. I’ve got a surprise for you.

The difference between a/an and the Draw a series of objects on the board, for example: a car, a dress, a computer. Indicate the car and ask the class: What’s this?
Get the answer It’s a car and write it on the board.
Say: Do you know anything about this car? Have you seen it before?
Have we talked about it before? (No.) So, we say: It’s a car.

Do the same with the other objects. Then write a price tag against each object.
Without indicating any of the objects, ask: How much do they cost?
Get the answers: The car costs $10,000. The dress costs $100, etc.
Write The car costs $10,000 on the board, and say: Have we talked about this car before? (Yes.)
So we say: The car costs $10,000.

Finally, tell students that we can’t say: It’s car. Car costs $10,000.
If necessary, explain the difference between a and an (a man, an apple, a university).

When the context tells us which thing or which person Write these sentences on the board:
JACK: I haven’t got a garage. I leave the car in the street.
Ask students: Jack says the car, so do we know which car he’s talking about? (Yes. His car.)
And he says the street. Do we know which street he means? (Yes. The street in front of his house/The street he lives in.)

Write this sentence on the board: JACK: I always eat in the kitchen.
Ask: Why does Jack say in the kitchen? (He means his kitchen/the kitchen in his house.)

A/an when we say what kind of person or thing Write this sentence on the board:
Kate works in a shop. Ask: Do we know what kind of shop? (No.)
Then write this sentence after the first: It’s a clothes shop.
Indicate the second sentence and ask: Have we talked about this shop before? (Yes.)
Ask: But we don’t say: It’s the clothes shop. Why not? (We don’t know which clothes shop.)

Then write on the board: Kate works in a shop.

Question: ...... ...... ....... is it? Answer: It’s a clothes shop.
Ask the class to complete the question. (What kind of shop is it?)
Then ask: So, do we use a or the when we say what kind of thing? (a)
Finally, do the same with: Kate’s talking to a customer. She’s a very difficult customer.

NB Explain to students that the numeral one can’t be used in place of a/an. It’s only used when the number of things or people is important. (I can only find one cup. I need two.)

Answers to WHAT’S THE RULE? 1:
A 1 No 2 the 3 a  B 1 It’s a nice 2b 3a
REMEMBER! 1 a, an a 2 The The 3 the; the 4 a, an a a
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**What do you need?**

Get students to practise the use of a/an.

Go quickly round the class, asking questions.

Examples:

- What do you need to lock a door? (You need a key.)
- What do you need when it rains? (You need an umbrella.)
- What do you need to get on the Internet? (You need a computer.)
- What do you need to take a photo? (You need a camera.)
- What do you need to send a letter? (You need a stamp/You need an envelope.)

To aid students' understanding, you can mime each of the objects/actions mentioned.

**Describe your bedroom**

Get students to describe their bedroom, using a/an. Tell them to write six sentences beginning with: There's a … I've got a …

They then work together in pairs.

Student A reads his/her sentences, and Student B asks where the objects are, using the.

Example:

Student A: There's a bed.

Student B: Where's the bed?

Student A: It's near the door. It's next to the window.

With objects like a computer, a CD player or a stereo, student B can ask for a description, using What kind is it?

Example:

Student A: I've got a CD player.

Student B: What kind is it?

Student A: It's a Sony.

**What's a carrot?**

This activity will allow students to practise:

a) the use of a/an to describe or classify things/people, and

b) the use of the to show that it's clear which thing/person we mean.

Give examples:

- Jamaica Jamaica is an island.
  (There are a lot of islands.)
- Paris Paris is the capital of France.
  (There's only one capital of France.)
- or Paris is a city in France.
  (There are a lot of cities in France.)

Then write a list of places, things and people on the board.

Examples: Rome an orange Cuba Columbus a Toyota Jupiter Queen Elizabeth a carrot Japanese tea rugby

Ask students: What are these things and places? Who are these people?

Students write their answers. Then ask the class about each item: What's Rome? What's an orange?

Their answers will show that there is sometimes more than one possibility.

**Open the door!**

Students practise the use of the where the context makes it clear which thing they're talking about. Write these words on the board:

floor, ceiling, door, board, light, table/desk, wall, cupboard, window.

Then, using one of the words, ask a student to do something:

Camilla, close the window, please.

Select another student, and indicating the words on the board, tell the rest of the class to ask him/her to do something.

Examples: Karl, sit on the floor/put your bag on the floor/look at the ceiling/clean the board/write your name on the board.

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**Answers to PRACTICE EXERCISES 1:**

1. 1e 2d 3a 4c 5b 2. 1 a 2 the 3 an 4 a 5 The 6 The 7 a 8 the 9 the 10 The 11 the 12 a 13 The
3. 1 the 2 a 3 the 4 the 5 a (letter) 6 the 7 a (CD player) 8 the 9 a 10 an 11 the 12 a 13 an 14 a
4. 1 the 2 an 3 the 4 the 5 the 6 the 7 a 8 a 9 a 10 an 11 the 12 a 13 an 14 a
Definite article (the) or indefinite article (a/an)?

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1 When do we use a/an and the? Match the sentences with the explanations.

1 There's a boy and a girl at the door. ☐
2 I know the boy, but I don't know the girl. ☐
3 It's Helen. She's a fantastic girl. ☐
4 She plays the guitar in a band. ☐
5 What's the name of the band? ☐

a) When we say what a thing or person is like.
b) When there is only one.
c) When we don't say which thing or which person.
d) When a thing is definite because we've talked about it/him/her before.
e) When it is clear from the situation which thing or person we mean.

2 Complete the text, using a, an or the.

Jack's got (1) a new bike. He bought (2) bike in town yesterday. But he had (3) accident on his way home. There was (4) truck in front of him. (5) truck stopped suddenly and Jack crashed into it. (6) truck driver asked Jack if he was all right. 'I'm fine,' said Jack, 'but I'll have to buy (7) new bike!' Jack took (8) bike back to (9) shop. (10) man in (11) shop examined it. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'You don't need (12) new bike. (13) front wheel's damaged, but that's all.'

3 Yasuko speaks English, but she often makes mistakes with a, an and the. Cross out the mistakes and write the correct word.

YASUKO: I live in Tokyo. We've got three computers in the house. I've got the computer in my bedroom. There's one in a living room, which my mother uses. And my father's got the laptop computer. I use an Internet a lot. And when I want to contact my uncle in Osaka, I don't write the letter to him, and I don't talk to him on the telephone. I send him the e-mail. I haven't got the CD player. When I want to play a CD, I use my computer.

1 a
2 a
3 a
4 a
5 a
6 a
7 a

4 Katherine's answering questions in a quiz. Complete the dialogue, using a, an or the.

QUIZMASTER: Katherine, here's (1) the first question, and it's (2) easy question!

What's (3) name of (4) highest mountain in (5) world?

KATHERINE: Everest.

QUIZMASTER: Yes, that's (6) right answer! Now, this is (7) more difficult question. What's Saint Helena?

KATHERINE: Is it (8) person?

QUIZMASTER: No, it isn't (9) person. It's (10) island in (11) Atlantic.

Finally, here's (12) question about food. What's a Granny Smith?

KATHERINE: It's (13) apple!

QUIZMASTER: Yes, it's (14) kind of apple. Well done, Katherine!