

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.



2 She showed *the* ring to a friend.

Look at Picture 1.

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 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 \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.*

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 ► a 2 a ► the 3 the ► a 4 an ► the 5 the ► a (letter) 6 the ► an 7 the ► a (CD player)
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*)?

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

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. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | a) When we say what a thing or person is like. |
| 2 I know the boy, but I don't know the girl. | <input type="checkbox"/> | b) When there is only one. |
| 3 It's Helen. She's a fantastic girl. | <input type="checkbox"/> | c) When we don't say which thing or which person. |
| 4 She plays the guitar in a band. | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) When a thing is definite because we've talked about it/him/her before. |
| 5 What's the name of the band? | <input type="checkbox"/> | 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~~ 1^a computer in my bedroom. There's one in a living room, which my mother uses. 2 And my father's got the laptop computer. 3 I use an Internet a lot. And when I want to contact my uncle in Osaka, 4 I don't write the letter to him, and I don't talk to him on the telephone. 5 I send him the e-mail. 6 I haven't got the CD player. When I want to play a CD, I use my computer. 7

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!